

Boating with the Pooch

Some safety items to think about

By Wayne Spivak
National Press Corps
United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

In the last ten years, I think my wife and I have gone out on our boat only a handful of times without our dog. That's a lot of hours on the water, with our beloved pooch.

Over the years, we've hit some bumpy seas, some very very hot and humid weather, and some ideal weather. We've gone swimming in bays, coves and chop. We've been lucky, but we also plan rather well.

Here are some tips that will make your day on the water safe and enjoyable for all the participants.

Drinking Water

First thing we do when getting underway is making sure we have enough water for the dog. Dogs perspire through panting, and while doing so, lose copious amounts of body fluids. It's imperative to keep them hydrated.

We bring our water in a sports bottle, with a sports cap. Our dog learned to drink from the sports cap probably around the same time she finished with her shots. We also carry a dog bowl, for her water.

Quite often, she snubs her water, while on the boat. Remember, you know better, and as responsible pet owners, sometimes you need to force them to drink. It's amazing what a little coaxing will do.

PFD's

The slogan "Boat Smart – Boat Safe – Wear It!" used in the Safe Boating Campaign holds true for both humans and pets. Not all dogs can swim! Not all dogs are great swimmers, and depending on where your boat is located, should fido fall overboard, he/she may not be able to reach you before he/she suffers from exhaustion or hypothermia.

So, have your dog wear a Personal Flotation Device (PFD). Pet PFD's are sold by all the major marine vendors. Now, don't just buy the PFD, try it on the dog once and throw it in the hold! Practice donning the vest, as well as having your pet swim with the PFD!

It's a new experience for them, and unless they get used to it, you'll have problems, should they ever really need to wear the PFD.

The Boat/US Foundation did a study on pet PFD's. Here's the URL:
<http://www.boatus.com/foundation/findings/findingsdog.htm>.

The New Pet

You've just gotten a new pet, and you want to take them boating. What a great idea! However, don't assume your pet will a) like your boat and b) enjoy boating! Dogs and cats (especially) like firm, stable surfaces. A boat can be anything but stable.

When you get a new pet, first thing you should do is acclimate them to the new environment, while the boat is tied up to its normal dock or mooring. Let the animal get used to its surroundings. Have them also wear their PFD awhile, during this time. This will get them acclimated not only to the boat, but the PFD.

Next turn on your engines and see if the sounds associated with them disturbs the animal. My dog couldn't care less about the sound of an engine, but thunder, a firecracker or any sudden loud noise, and she freaks out. Better to be safe than sorry, for both you and the well being of your pets.

Take short trips at first, again to let your pet get acclimated to the pitch and roll of boating. Remember, if you can get seasick, so can your pets!

Sun & Heat

We all hope, when we go boating to have a warm sunny day. That's fine for you, but special attention must be paid to your pets! Too much sun and heat will cause heat problems for the animal.

Dogs and cats (as well as many other pets) can suffer the same types of heat emergencies humans can. They include, heat cramps, heat exhaustion and sun stroke.

Make sure you have a shaded area on your boat that your pet can hide under. Hopefully there is air movement, to aid in cooling them down. Remember to make sure they drink, and I find wetting down their coats also helps them feel cooler -- or it helps us feel that they feel cooler.

Protect their pads. Dogs and cats absorb cold and heat through their pads, and you need to be aware that they don't burn them on the hot fiberglass.

Doing their Business

As you find after a couple hours on the boat that you need to use the head, so will your animal. You have a few options, depending on the type of pet you have.

Cats – place their litter box at the lowest level of your boats, and make sure its level. This should induce them to use their liter box. Also, by making sort of a castle with pillows, at the same point (lowest level), should you get into rough seas, kitty may feel more secure.

Dogs – you can train your dog to do his/her business in a specific spot. Its hard work, but it can be done. If you're going to cruise, this would be the best bet. This way, you don't have to find land every few hours so fido can relieve him/herself.

On the other hand, you can always go ashore and let them do their business. Remember, pick up and properly dispose of the waste products left by your animals. The Marine Sanitation Environmental Laws, should be respected; even though this is not human waste – it sill causes bacterial problems. In fact, if you go ashore, there may well be animal waste laws in effect!

Boating with the family pet is a great way to enjoy this wonderful sport. By taking a few extra steps, you can insure a fun, safe time for all.

For more information about boating safety, why not pursue your boating education by taking one of the many courses that the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary provides to the public. You can contact your local Auxiliary Flotilla by either contacting your local Coast Guard Unit (www.uscg.mil) or the Auxiliary (www.cgaux.org).