

# Boating 101

## Get in the know before you go

**A**labama Law Enforcement has more than tripled the manpower on Lake Martin this year with the addition of two officers on the lake now and one in training.

“That’s three more than last year,” said Lt. Mark Fuller, assistant commander for the Central District of Alabama. “When you have stronger visibility, people tend to obey the rules more often.”

Having additional eyes on the lake will enable the marine patrol to augment their safety inspections and monitor traffic more closely.

Boat traffic is expected to pick up this month, now that temperatures have stabilized on the upper end of the spectrum, and while higher gasoline prices could affect the movement of boats, Fuller said, it’s not likely to affect the number of boats.

“Instead of riding around more, people will probably spend time on the water rafting up or finding a slough where they can hang out for the day,” he said.

When they do, he cautioned, boaters need to be responsible about their alcohol use on the lake.

“The amount of alcohol on boats and being consumed is a big concern. And it’s not necessarily by the operator. People who drink too much on the water become a danger to themselves and don’t realize it,” he said.

Even passengers need to keep their wits about them at all times, as they will have to make quick decisions and take immediate action in emergencies.

One of the biggest safety issues on the lake, Fuller said, is lack of common courtesy and disregard or lack of knowledge of the rules of the road.

“When people are operating where they shouldn’t be, they create safety hazards for themselves and for others on the water,” Fuller said. “For instance, if you have someone on the wrong side in a narrow channel, others have to also be in the wrong to compensate for that person to avoid an accident.”

When a boat operator does not follow the rules, others cannot predict how that operator will react in traffic, which jeopardizes everyone in the area.

Another safety issue that marine patrol officers see frequently is people standing up and walking about in a moving vessel, Fuller said.

“People can be thrown overboard,” he said. “It’s particularly dangerous if they stand up or move in front of the operator and obstruct his view.”

It’s not a bad idea to review the boating rules of the road before going out on the water each season. The Alabama boating rules can be downloaded for free from the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency website.

In addition, it’s always a good idea to inspect the boat – every time – before taking it out on the water, Fuller said.

“Make sure the lights work properly, especially if you plan to be out after sunset. Check to make sure you have the proper number and size of life jackets.”

And make sure the registration is up to date and properly displayed.

“The most common infraction is related to registration. It might be improperly displayed, or it might be expired, but that’s something people don’t always get around to before they take the boat out,” he said. “For us, it’s a funding issue.”

The Marine Patrol Division operates on boating license fees.

But water safety is not limited to the vessels on the lake. Last year, two people died on Alabama lakes due to electrical current in the water around docks.

Electrical connections can be easily compromised here, as boxes and wiring may be corroded or worn from exposure to the elements.

“We encourage all homeowners to get electrical supplies at the dock checked and make sure there are no wires shorting out,” Fuller said.

Electrical current in the water will paralyze swimmers, making them unable to swim to safety or get out of the water. Anyone who sees a swimmer in this situation should not dive in to make a rescue, but should first call 911; and then, turn off any nearby electrical supply.

Instead of going into the water to pull a swimmer to safety, throw a ring to the swimmer and pull him in with an attached rope or use a shepherd’s crook (also known as a life hook) to reach a person in trouble.

Knowing the rules, inspecting gear and being courteous could be the difference between a great time on the water or causing an accident, Fuller said, so take the time to play it safe at Lake Martin this summer.

