

Don't Miss the Boat

By Reg P. Wydeven
July 17, 2016

Over the 4th of July weekend, our family stayed at my in-laws' cottage up north. We had an awesome weekend: we had gorgeous weather, I almost landed a musky with my H2O Tackle lure, we lit off some fireworks and had several delicious meals on the grill. But apparently we weren't the only ones who thought it would be a good idea to head to the north woods.

On Saturday afternoon, there were about 50 watercraft cruising around our small lake, including pontoons, sport boats, fishing boats, canoes, paddle boats, kayaks and jet skis. Many of the boats were pulling kids on inner tubes or other floating devices, on wakeboards and on skis. Two boats were pulling three skiers at the same time. It was like an audition for the Tommy Bartlett show.

The lake was pretty chaotic, so we just watched from shore. In fact, we started a little contest to see who could count up the most safety violations.

Just like cars have rules of the road, boats are also governed by similar laws. Like a car, a boat has a legal title and needs to be registered with the State. A boat has age restrictions to be operated – you must be at least 12 and now must take a boater safety course approved by the DNR. All vessels must have at least one wearable life jacket for each passenger on board and all riders of a jet ski must be wearing the life jacket. Also like a car, a boat can't be operated recklessly or negligently and its driver can't be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

On a small lake during a busy weekend, following boating rules can be tricky. For example, unless a boat is traveling at a no-wake speed (meaning it is traveling as slowly as possible while still able to be steered), it cannot be within 100 feet of a dock, a swimmer or shore.

Jet skis have even tighter restrictions, and here is where we observed the most violations. A jet ski has to stay 200 feet away from shore, 100 feet away from a boat towing anyone and anyone being towed, and 100 feet away from other vessels when jumping in their wake. Jet skis cannot weave in and out of congested traffic and cannot be operated when it's dark.

Many jet skis these days are powerful enough to tow someone. Like with a boat, if a jet ski tows a person on skis, a wakeboard or an inner tube, there must be a spotter riding on the jet ski to ensure the person being towed is safe.

In addition, to tow someone, a jet ski must be able to accommodate three riders. In case the skis or wakeboard are lost, the inner tube deflates, or the person being towed gets tired or injured, the jet ski must be able to hold the driver, the spotter and the person being towed. This law was far and away the one we saw being violated the most, presumably because people aren't aware of this requirement.

While nothing's better than cruising around the lake on a hot day, please remember these important laws so you can safely return to port. Failing to operate a watercraft safely can result in hefty fines, again, just like with a car. So follow the rules or else you might be sunk.

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