

Coast Guard Auxiliary Helps Keep Waterways Safe

BY DOUG RUTTER

Thousands of boats will be cruising the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway this summer. At least one of them won't be out for a joy ride.

It will be manned by members of Shallotte Flotilla 10-08 of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, a local volunteer group that assists the U.S. Coast Guard and makes the water a safer place for everyone.

Auxiliaries will be busy this summer helping boaters with engine trouble, towing disabled craft, removing debris and trash from the water and offering free boat inspections.

Members of the local flotilla use their own boats to patrol the waters between Lockwood Folly Inlet and Little River Inlet on weekends and holidays during the peak boating season.

During a recent patrol, John Fletcher, a past commander of the flotilla, said that the auxiliary acts as the eyes and ears of the Oak Island Coast Guard Station, which is 19 miles from Lockwood Folly Inlet.

Besides helping boaters in trouble, Coast Guard Auxiliary members remove hazards to navigation such as logs, docks and lumber while they patrol.

"After a storm, you find all kinds of things floating through here," said Bill Grancsay, a member of the Shallotte flotilla and public affairs officer for the division.

Fletcher's boat, the Heady Marie, is equipped with two hooks and a dip net that

can be used to remove cans and other trash from the water.

Most of the patrolling is done in the waterway and rivers. It's up to the boat skipper to decide if the boat should go into the ocean. Auxiliaries usually don't patrol once the water temperature drops below 60 degrees.

The Shallotte flotilla formed approximately 12 years ago and presently has about 35 members. The group can always use new members, whether they have a boat or not.

"Boats we got, bodies we need," Fletcher said. With a rotating schedule, most members patrol one day per month. Each patrol boat must be manned by a certified boat operator and crew member.

To join the auxiliary, you must be a United States citizen and at least 18 years old. Members say nobody is too old to contribute—two of the past commanders are in their 80s.

Prospective members also must pass a safe boating course taught by the auxiliary. The class covers areas such as knot tying, radio communications, trailering, aids to navigation, marine engines and weather.

Once they join, auxiliaries have the opportunity to take several specialty courses including the classes needed for designation as crew member, boat operator and coxswain.

Fletcher, who recently completed the coxswain course, said the auxiliary classes go over just about everything that's covered



AUXILIARISTS ABOARD the Heady Marie prepare to leave the dock at Hughes' Marina at Shallotte Point for a day on the water.



STAFF PHOTOS BY DOUG RUTTER

COAST GUARD AUXILIARISTS (from left) Tom McConaghie, Bill Grancsay and John Fletcher chat during a recent patrol on the waterway.

in a captain's licensing course, except a few areas such as first aid.

Auxiliaries say the biggest problems they see in area waters are people running aground because they are not familiar with local conditions.

"A lot of people come from inland, and they're not used to tidal shifts," Fletcher said. "They're used to boating in a lake that's the same depth all day. On the coast, you've got to base a lot of decisions on the tide."

Fletcher, a former division operations officer for the Coast Guard Auxiliary, said the group has come a long way in recent years. Along with the guardsmen and re-

servists, he said auxiliaries are now being accepted as part of the Coast Guard family.

"You might as well spit in the senior chief's face as mess with the auxiliaries," Fletcher said.

Although some boaters see the Coast Guard Auxiliary as policemen of the waterways, the auxiliaries are primarily an easy-going group with no authority to issue citations.

Local flotilla members say most people listen when they're told they are operating in a careless manner. And the auxiliaries know how to have a good time on the job.

"We've got to have fun out here, the pay ain't worth a darn," Fletcher says with a

smile. "We got a big raise last year. Instead of zero its gone to double zero."

If there's one drawback to serving in the Coast Guard Auxiliary, it might just be that members aren't allowed to fish while they are patrolling.

Grancsay said he will invariably come across large schools of fish while he's on the job, never when he's out looking for fish. That's exactly what happened last year when he was helping out with a king mackerel tournament.

"They were practically jumping in the boat," Grancsay said regretfully. "You could have put your hat in the water and caught them."

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