

How to Navigate – Part 1

In this article, I am only going to focus on the markers on Lake Gaston. In my next article I will focus on the ‘lateral markers,’ or what we call ATON’s. (Aids TO Navigation).

Our lake runs ‘west’ to ‘east’ and is about 34 miles long. Our shore line is over 350 miles. We have many ‘creeks’ and the varying depths and obstructions make it important to know how to safely navigate.

First, a little basic navigation. There are two types of ‘markers’ on our lake. That is, markers found on both the ‘main lake’ (the river) and those up in the ‘creeks’. These are placed to assist boaters in navigating our lake. These buoys are fixed to the lake bottom by a weight and tethered by a line or chain.

On our lake – these are called ‘Non-Lateral Markers’. These are navigation aids that give information other than the edges of safe water areas. The most common are regulatory markers that are white and use orange markings and black lettering. These are found on lakes and rivers and are used to:

1. Give direction and information
2. Warn of hazards and obstructions
3. Mark controlled areas
4. Mark off-limits area.

Let’ discuss each:

1. ‘Information’: These have squares on them and provide information such as places to find food, supplies, and repairs; and they give directions, distances, and other non-regulatory information.

2. ‘Danger area’: These have diamonds on them and warn of dangers such as rocks, shoals, construction, dams, or stumps. Always proceed with caution and keep a safe distance. Never assume that every hazard will be marked by a buoy !

3. ‘Controlled Areas’: These have circles on them and indicate a controlled area such as no wake, idle speed, speed limit, or ski zone.

4. ‘Exclusion Area’: These have crossed diamonds on them and indicate areas off-limits to all vessels such as swimming areas, dams, and spillways.

Several years ago Dominion Power installed ‘mile markers’. The first mile marker is one mile from the Gaston Dam, then two, three, four.....etc. These have been a tremendous aid to our boaters. It has also been a great assist to those of us in the Coast Guard Auxiliary, Coast Guard, and both VA and NC Wildlife in helping find boaters in distress. If you concentrate on each of these – when you break down – you can give us your last position. We can then find you with much more ease. Remember the size of our lake !

Now, here I would like to point out something very important! These buoys are very expensive – and require a great deal of hard work insuring that each of these buoys are in their proper location. We’ve had situations in which some boaters deliberately damage these buoys. Some don’t like the lights on the top of some of the buoys. These are obviously there to assist the night time boaters. Whenever damage is done to these buoys – we all pay! Our tax dollars at work folks. Let’s don’t waste our tax dollars. Be

courteous and stay away from the buoys. Dominion Power owns the mile markers: Both VA and NC own many others in their state: And the 'private' buoys are owned by individual owner(s).

Stay away: Let's talk about that. You NEVER tie up to a buoy. And, if you are at planing speed – stay at least 50 feet away from these buoys. Your bow waves can move them off position. If these are danger buoys – they can stray away from huge rocks in the lake which are really hard on the bottom of your boat. If any of you have ever had to pay to have fiberglass repaired – you will appreciate my remarks. Repairing fiberglass is expensive.

Learn more about all aspects of being a better boater by coming to the US Coast Guard Auxiliary's next boating safety class.

Our boating safety classes are taught the third Saturday of each month from March to September. For information on enrolling in this class – please call 252 535-3335