



Cruising Safely Into Summer

Preparing your boat and trailer for summer cruising fun

By John Strong, Principal Marine Surveyor, ACE Recreational Marine Insurance

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The weather's warmer, the days are longer, and naturally, your thoughts turn more and more to your boat. It's been covered up, waiting on its trailer, all winter. Now you've decided to get it ready for summer adventures.

Last fall, you did all the right things to prepare your boat to sail through winter, including:

- Removing the battery and electronics and storing them in the garage
- Winterizing the engine
- Cleaning the bilges and emptying all the lockers
- Covering the boat and parking it out back
- Removing the prop
- Putting the lock on the trailer's hitch, and removing a wheel to discourage thieves
- Pulling the drain plug in, so your boat wouldn't collect rain, water, or snow melt

You can congratulate yourself, now, as you see how well your boat survived the coldest months of the year. But what should you do to get your boat and trailer ready for their maiden voyage this boating season?

The Tow Vehicle

The rear brakes and the emergency brake on a vehicle that submerges its rear wheels during launching take a lot of abuse. Rust, for example, can be a real problem. The rear wheels should be removed once a year, and the rear brakes carefully examined and serviced, if necessary.

Your tow vehicle's transmission may need to be serviced, too. Automatic transmissions should be equipped with fluid coolers to extend their life. If your vehicle has four-wheel-drive, the transfer case and front differential might need service as well. Be sure the system engages properly, before you get to the launch ramp.

If the roads in your area are salted in the winter, and if you use your tow vehicle year round, be sure to inspect the entire chassis and the suspension for any corrosion.

Inspect the trailer hitch and receiver. Be sure the receiver assembly is tightly attached to the vehicle's frame, and that it hasn't been damaged by rust. Be sure that the nut on the hitch ball is tight, that the ball mount is securely pinned in the receiver, and that the retainer is in place on the pin. Finally, be sure to give the hitch ball a fresh coat of grease.

The Trailer

Boat trailers generally last longer in regions where they only get dipped in fresh water, but they still need a careful going-over each spring anyway.

Larger trailers have surge brakes, and they need the same attention as the brakes on your tow vehicle. The wheels should be removed so the brakes can be carefully inspected.

The master cylinder on the trailer's tongue should be checked, and topped up with the correct fluid, if necessary. Carefully clean the area around the cap on the master cylinder's reservoir before you remove it. If the fluid level is low, check the entire system for leaks.

Check all the brake lines, which are made of steel and are susceptible to rust. A small leak will show up as a dark spot where the leaking fluid has collected dirt. If a leak is found and repaired, the system must then be bled to get rid of air. Since most trailer brakes are activated by a pivot assembly on the tongue, they are hard to bleed (there's no brake pedal to push), so this job may involve a trip to a brake shop that has a pressure bleeder.

Your trailer's wheel bearings should be greased, too. If the bearings aren't equipped with grease fittings, consider having some installed this year. There are several brands of bearing caps on the market that will let you grease the bearings without taking anything apart.

The wiring for the lights and turn signals should be inspected, and any chafed spots or bad connections should be repaired. Be sure the plug at the hitch is clean and in good condition. The first time the trailer is connected to the tow vehicle, check the tail lights, side lights, brake lights and turn signals to make sure they're all working properly.

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Check the air pressure in the trailer's tires. The maximum pressure is printed on the sidewalls of the tires, and trailer tires often take higher pressure than the tires on a car or truck.

Be sure the trailer's safety chains or cables are in good condition, and that they will securely attach to the rear of the tow vehicle. There should be two chains or cables, one on each side of the hitch, and they should be long enough to allow the trailer to turn tight corners, but not so long that they drag on the pavement.

The Boat

Your boat's battery should be connected to a charger for a day or so before it's returned to the boat. Once the winter storage cover has been removed, the battery can be connected and secured in its acid-resistant container. Be sure that terminals and cable ends are clean and that polarity is correct before connecting.

Inspect the propeller for any signs of damage, and have it serviced, if necessary, before installing it. Replace any sacrificial zincs as the manufacturer recommends. If it's an outboard or inboard/outboard, and the fluid in the lower unit wasn't replaced last fall, it's likely a good idea to do it now. When draining the fluid, look for any sign of cloudiness, which indicates water in the fluid. If the fluid is contaminated with water, it usually means a seal or gasket is leaking, and the unit must be repaired. Bearing damage can be the expensive result of water leaking into the unit's fluid.

If the boat has a two-stroke outboard motor, hook a hose to the motor's flushing attachment, and start it up on the trailer to make sure it's working properly. If it's an inboard engine, check the bilge blower for proper operation, and be sure the blower's intake hose is correctly positioned – below the engine, and above the normal bilge water level. Operate the steering lock-to-lock to see if it's operating properly.

If you changed the oil in your inboard engine or four-stroke outboard last fall, it's a good idea to change it again in the spring, to get rid of any moisture that collected due to condensation during the winter months. You'll have a chance to check for proper exhaust water flow and battery charging while you warm the engine up for its oil change.

Now that the servicing is done, it's time for the spring cleaning. This should be the most thorough cleaning the boat will get all year. Keep a "punch list" of items you find that need attention while you're cleaning, so you can take care of them before the first launch.

Once everything's been serviced and cleaned, you can bring your gear aboard. The safety equipment should be inspected to be sure life jackets, flares, anchor, fire extinguisher, and electronics are ready to go. Don't forget the drain plug!

The Details

Remember to be sure your registration tags are current on your boat, trailer, and tow vehicle. Also, make sure your insurance is up to date. Be sure to put your insurance company's claims phone number in your wallet, just in case.

The Launch

You got as good a look at your trailer as you could before the first trip. You made sure the winch cable and tie-downs were in good condition and that they were tight enough.

Be sure to take some tools and rust-proofing paint to the launch site. Then, spend a few minutes looking at the parts of your trailer that you couldn't see before the boat was launched. Scrape loose paint and scale from any rusty areas you find, and touch them up with paint. Make sure all the rollers turn easily, and the bunks and bunk covering are in good shape.

The first launch of the season will go smoothly, and everything on the boat will be ready to go, when you do what's needed to give yourself and your family a trouble-free boating season.

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