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[Return to Entertainment](#)

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[Previous story](#) [Next story](#)



Boating

Low lake levels: Cruise carefully

SITE INDEX

- Homepage
- Search
- CyberSurveys
- ▶ News Talk
- ▶ Sports Talk
- ▶ Lions Talk
- ▶ Wings Talk
- ▶ Tiger Talk
- ▶ Car Talk
- ▶ Tech Talk
- Horoscope
- Hot Sites
- Lottery
- Weather
- Staff

NEWS

- Autos
- ▶ Joyrides
- Business
- Careers
- Census
- Columnists
- Commuting
- Detroit History
- Editorials
- Health
- Metro / State
- ▶ Livingston
- ▶ Macomb
- ▶ Oakland
- ▶ Wayne
- ▶ On Detroit
- Nation / World
- Obituaries
- ▶ Death Notices
- Politics / Govt.
- Real Estate
- Religion
- Schools
- Special Reports
- Technology

SPORTS

- Sports Home
- ▶ Lions/NFL
- ▶ Red Wings/NHL
- ▶ Pistons/NBA
- ▶ Shock/WNBA
- ▶ Tigers/Baseball
- ▶ MSU
- ▶ U-M
- More Colleges
- Golf Guide
- High Schools
- Motor Sports
- More Sports
- Scoreboards

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David Coates / The Detroit News

Some boaters are leaving their craft ashore because of water levels.

By Mary Quinley / Special to The Detroit News

For the more than 1 million boat owners in Michigan, the prediction of continuing low Great Lakes water levels sends a message to slow down and stay alert.

"Boaters are paying attention more and more now than in the past," says Tom Angott, public education officer of the U.S. Coast Guard. "However, there are still a lot (of people) who don't."

Angott says that the water levels on Lake St. Clair will probably be as low as or lower than last year.

"The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expect the levels to go up a little in the spring," he says. "As summer approaches, they expect the levels to drop again."

Lake St. Clair, a mecca for Metro boaters, is very shallow anyway except for the shipping channels. According to the Army Corps of Engineers based in Detroit, water levels in Lakes Michigan and Huron, which feed Lake St. Clair, have dropped 40 inches

Information, please

To inquire about water levels or to enroll in a boating skills class, contact one of the following agencies:

* Oakland County Sheriff's Department, Marine Division, (248) 391-0256.

* Macomb County Sheriff's Department, Marine Division, (810) 469-5803.

* Belle Isle Coast Guard Station, (313) 331-3110; or the Coast Guard Auxiliary, (810) 778-3320.

For a copy of Local Notice to Mariners, a free brochure for boaters published monthly by the Coast Guard, write to: Commander Ninth Coast Guard District (OAN), 1240 E. Ninth, Cleveland, OH44199-2060.

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 ► [Home Tech](#)
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during the past three years. This equates to an 8-inch decrease in Lake St. Clair.

Some boaters have opted to remain docked rather than risk running aground. Not so for Steve Cole and his family of boat lovers.

"(Water levels) didn't stop us from eating at our favorite restaurants or taking lengthy trips to Canada and Ohio (ports)," says the Beverly Hills resident, who logged 175 to 250 hours last year.

He says he calls marinas to inquire about their water levels before he ventures out.

What about other tips for boaters? Lt. Daniel Shunk of the Macomb County Sheriff's Department offers these suggestions:

* Know how to read a navigational chart. "The water levels on Lake St. Clair are really close to what the chart indicates," he says. "If the chart says the water is 1 foot, it means it."

* Stay in the channels coming in and out of marinas.

* Be sure the boat's depth sounder works.

* Know your draft clearance.

* Watch for hazards like sunken objects and floating logs.

If you plan to cruise the Detroit River, says Petty Officer Adam Kane of the Coast Guard, be aware of shallow areas, especially when maneuvering in and out of channels.

"I've noticed rocks in coves that weren't visible in past years," he says. Kane also stresses the importance of paying attention to navigational charts and channel markers.

Inland lakes, like those at Stony Creek and Kent Lake Metroparks, are not experiencing decreased levels because dams control the water.

Mary Quinley is a free-lance writer. You can reach her at quinleym@aol.com.

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