

Boating Tips

Restricted Visibility

The visibility was about 50 yards when I embarked on a winter's journey from the Delta to the Bay. Specifically, I was delivering a 36-foot, gas-powered aft cabin cruiser from Bethel Harbor to Oyster Point Marina.

The radar and GPS were brand new and working perfectly. I didn't know it then, but I was going to need all of the navigation tools at my disposal to get this puppy delivered safely that day.

We headed out Piper Slough at about 8:30 a.m. by navigating close to the levee on the south side. I turned my navigation lights on right away. I got through the "S" turns OK, but as usual encountered a few bass boats out in the fog. This gave me a perspective of how far the visibility was – not good! I started sounding my horn with one long blast every two minutes as required through the automatic hailing system onboard.

I got my first "wake up call" in dense fog while encountering the Bradford Island Ferry underway off my port bow. I couldn't figure out where he was headed. There is only point A and point B and he was not headed toward either.

Right at that moment it dawned on me that it was I who was not headed in the right direction. By paying attention to the ferry, I missed the turn onto False River and ended up at the entrance to Fisherman's Cut. Whoa! Never done

THAT before!

OK, now that I'm back on track I can see the San Joaquin River from my position on False River. This is a good thing. The fog is lifting. No worries for the rest of the trip. NOT!

As soon as I merged with the San Joaquin River, the fog came slamming back in with visibility at about 100 yards. This is when I started integrating all of the electronic navigation equipment onboard with dead reckoning in order to navigate safely in very restricted visibility.

No problem. Only 60 treacherous miles to go... I used the GPS to go from buoy to buoy and stay in the channel. The radar kept me aware of the shorelines and any other traffic or buoys in my path. The fact that I've seen and interpreted literally hundreds of radar echoes on clients' boats over the years came in handy. I had the range set for one-half mile.

The dense fog continued from the juncture of False River and the San Joaquin River all the way to the entrance to New York Slough in Pittsburg. The most important thing I did was to slow down and keep a sharp lookout.

Finally, a break. We stopped to fuel up at Pittsburg, but before we went through the breakwater I looked at the situation ahead and hoped the fog would lift enough to safely continue. To my relief, the fog had indeed lifted if just a little during the time we were fueling up. No



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

problem for the rest of the trip. NOT!

Within 3 miles we were back in the thick of it. Now I had to deal with navigating the area around Middle Ground and the Mothball Fleet, which, as experienced mariners know, can trip you up and run you aground in a heartbeat. The fog stayed with us all the way to Benicia Marina. No visibility whatsoever. Again, the most important element to handling a situation like this is to slow down and keep a sharp lookout!

After we passed Benicia Marina, I could see the Carquinez Bridge in the distance. Great! Smooth sailing for the rest of the trip. NOT!

Right after entering Upper San Pablo Bay, we went back into a dense fog. By this time I'd gotten accustomed to the specific navigation systems I was using and felt a lot more comfortable. This is a good thing because we spent the next 15 miles in dense fog. This is where the compass came into play.

In zero visibility it is very easy to drift off course if you are not paying attention. This is especially true in areas like the Bay and Delta where you have things out of your control, such as current, tides and wind. Having made this trip hundreds of times before helped in that I've got the general compass headings memorized for the large

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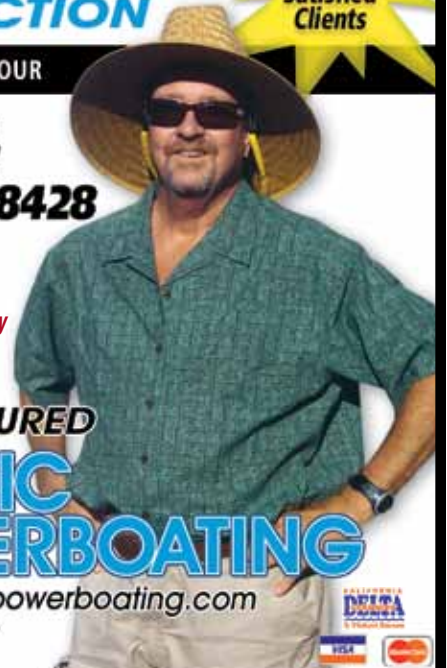
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open stretches of water like San Pablo Bay.

I was navigating east of the main shipping channel and aiming for one-quarter mile east of the red channel markers, so there was little chance of encountering a large ship in my path. My biggest concern was the Vallejo Ferry. These captains take the same route to San Francisco I was taking and travel at over 25 knots (at least), sometimes even in restricted visibility.

The thing about fog is once you are in it for a while you lose your sense of how far you can see. You have no (visual) sensory input because you can't see anything except

“white.” You don't really know what the visibility is until you come into visual contact with another vessel or object. This can wear you down. It takes 100 percent focus to safely transit a high traffic zone in dense fog.

The first vessel we encountered in San Pablo Bay was a commercial charter fishing boat bobbing silently in the fog with no way on. None of the fishermen onboard said a word or waved as we passed by slowly out and back into the fog. It reminded me of a scene from “Apocalypse Now” with Martin Sheen. I waived to them anyway.

Next, I spotted a tugboat pushing a barge about one-quarter mile to my east. This gave me peace of mind for a little while. Then we were right back in it again. We passed another cruiser heading up toward Vallejo at the Brothers Islands

at Point Richmond (visibility: 50 yards).

I kept looking for the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge, but it seemed like it took forever to come into view. When it did we were 50 yards in front of one of the main piers to the eastern main span.

While I was ascertaining the exact position of the bridge in front of us visually as well as on radar, I was tracking a very fast-moving object coming up from my stern. The Vallejo Ferry was on my starboard quarter and coming on fast. As usual, the expert captain on this vessel took appropriate evasive action and gave me one blast of his horn to indicate his intention to pass me on my starboard side.

We finally broke out of the fog around Angel Island and stepped it up to 3200 rpm. Smooth sailing the rest of the way! We arrived safely, secured the boat to the dock and headed home after a long day on the water. That was fun! HA!

Kevo's Tip:

Navigating in dense fog in the San Francisco Bay/Delta region is serious and dangerous business. You had better have the right (navigation) tools and know how to use them.

Choose your battles carefully. Consider aborting your journey for the day if you don't feel confident you can safely navigate the possible conditions you may encounter.

Be safe & happy boating!

As usual, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com. ☞