

KEVO'S BOATING TIPS & MORE

BY
KEVIN
O'LEARY



Aids to Navigation: Buoys

A while ago I was doing a delivery on a brand new 53-ft. motoryacht from the Oakland/Alameda estuary to Sausalito. The owner of the vessel was with me and it was quite apparent that he had no clue how to operate his new vessel.

Although I was just doing a delivery, not instructing, I felt sorry for the guy. So along the way I started asking him if he knew the meaning of the various buoys we were passing. He had absolutely no knowledge whatsoever of the meaning (or importance) of the aids to navigation we were passing. He did not even know what "Red Right Returning" meant. I did my best in the time it took to make the trip to get him acquainted with the bouyage system and the meaning of the buoys we were passing.

To experienced mariners, this probably sounds incredible given the size and cost of the vessel. But it's true. This guy just plunked down \$700,000 on a brand new yacht and had no idea how to navigate using aids to navigation. Now, if this were an isolated incident it wouldn't be such a big deal. But it's not. I am constantly amazed by the complete lack of understanding of how to safely navigate the waterways of the Delta and Bay using (in part) aids to navigation. This is one of the most important subjects I teach inexperienced boaters at Pacific Powerboating.

There are way too many aids to navigation to cover them adequately within the space of this column. So I'm going to focus on some of what you're likely to encounter on the major waterways of the Bay and Delta and how to use them to your advantage. I'll probably return to this subject in future columns or in response to the tons of correspondence I get from my loyal readers... HA! (That's: kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com)

Red Right Returning

First, let's explain Red Right Returning: The two most important buoy colors you need to remember are red and green. If your vessel is returning from the open ocean to inland waterways such as the Bay or Delta, keep the red buoys on your right or starboard side. Hence the phrase: Red Right Returning or RRR. This will keep you in the deep-water channel and safe from running aground. In addition, this is an easy way to determine which direction you are going if you're not sure. In this case, the green buoys are kept to your left or port.

If on the other hand, you're heading out toward the sea, you keep the green buoys on your right. This is relative to our chosen course. If you are heading from Pittsburg to Antioch, you are heading from the open ocean to the inland waterways. Keep the red buoys on the right. Red Right Returning, RRR!

The Buoyage System

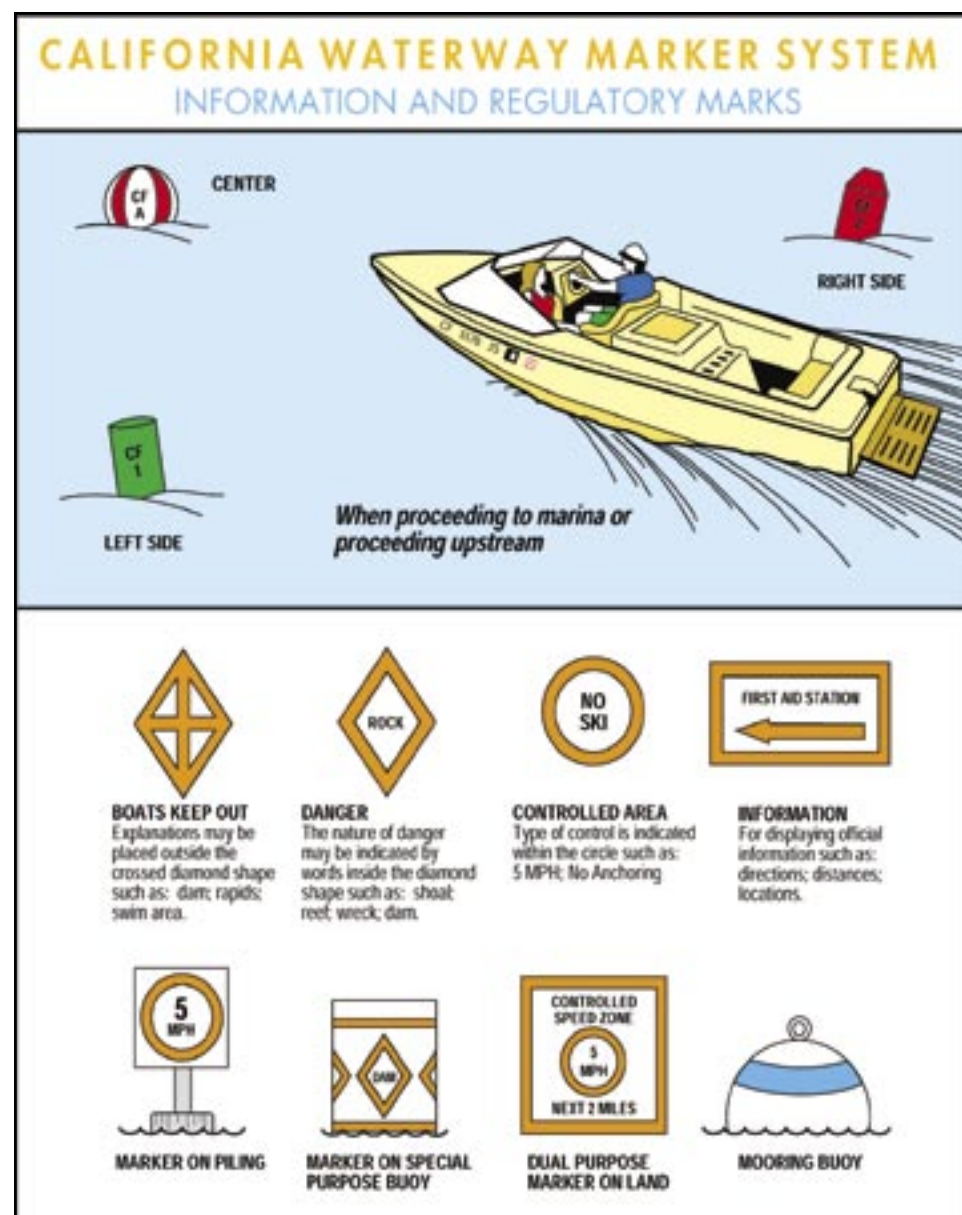
Buoys are aids to navigation most likely to be commonly found along the inland waterways and SF Bay.

There are many different types of buoys. For our purposes, I'll describe a few types you will probably encounter:

CAN BUOY: These are green and mark the port (left) side of the channel when returning from seaward, or a hazard you must pass by keeping the buoy to port. They look similar to a 55-gallon drum but are actually much larger.

NUN BUOYS: These are painted red and mark the starboard (right) side of the channel when returning from seaward, or a hazard you must pass by keeping the buoy to starboard (right). A nun buoy looks similar to a can buoy with a cone on the top of it.

MID-CHANNEL/FAIRWAY BUOYS: These are painted red and white with vertical stripes. These mark the middle of the channel and are sometimes referred to as safe-water buoys.



PREFERRED CHANNEL BUOYS: These are painted with red and green horizontal bands. They mark the safest choice of channels if confronted with a choice.

MOORING BUOYS: These are usually white and round. They have an eyelet on the top to secure a line to. Sometimes these buoys have a blue horizontal stripe around them.

DAY BEACONS OR DAY MARKS: These are basically telephone poles driven into the bottom of waterways with signs on them or on the bank of a waterway. A red triangle indicates the port or left side of the channel when returning from seaward. A green square indicates the starboard or right side of the channel when returning from seaward.

Buoy Numbering System

Odd-numbered buoys are green and mark the port side of the channel when returning from seaward. Even-numbered buoys are red and mark the starboard side of the channel when returning from seaward. The numbers increase from seaward. So, for instance, if you were coming under the Golden Gate Bridge heading inland, your first buoy would be number 1, green to port. Number 2 would be the next (red) buoy to starboard. This is an easy, safe and effective way to stay on course if you know to turn at a certain buoy. Just follow the numbers. Trust me, it is very reassuring if you are not familiar with the area or visibility is poor. Also, GPS units will show you the number of the buoy you are passing.

Inland Waterway Travel

The buoyage system also helps direct traffic on the major waterways of Northern California. For instance, if you are traveling toward the Bay from the Delta, stay to the right of the channel and pass relatively close to the green buoys, which will be on your right or starboard side. Conversely, if you are headed inland from the Bay, stay to the right of the channel and keep the red buoys on your right.

Other Valuable Tools

Aids to navigation should be considered just that: Aids. What this means is that one should not rely 100 percent on the buoyage system to safely navigate the Bay and Delta. They should be used in conjunction with “dead reckoning,” GPS, nautical charts of the area and landmarks such as Mt. Diablo. The reason for this is that buoys can become dislodged from their stated position by any number of factors including storms, current, collision with large vessels and so on. Sometimes they are actually underwater because of an unusually high tide.

It is illegal to tie up to any aid to navigation. Mooring buoys are the only appropriate buoys to tie up to. However, if your vessel is adrift, anchorless and you are in danger of running aground, by all means tie up to anything you can find until help arrives. Ha!

Be safe and happy boating! As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com or 925/890-8428. 🚤