



Commercial Traffic

One of the unique aspects about being a waterways conservation officer in Delaware County is the opportunity to work in an area with a high volume of commercial traffic on the Delaware River. Unlike the Three Rivers or Lake Erie, where you can find a large variety of commercial vessels, the Delaware River has ships of immense length, width and height. On the tidal portion of the Delaware River it is common to be sailing along and be passed by several ships of lengths over 1,000 feet in a half-hour's time. Some of these vessels can displace huge amounts of water, creating large wakes that can greatly affect small-boat navigation. These large ships are slow to turn and slow to pick up or dissipate speed. There are very few places on the river where such large vessels can even navigate, and most of them are in the center of the channel. A slight shift in their path can cause a catastrophic accident. Such an accident can greatly affect both commercial interests on the river such as trade with foreign countries and environmental interests, which affect the health and welfare of the river's ecosystem. The owners of these ships from around the world want to avoid such catastrophes, and they pay premium rates to the Delaware River pilots who come aboard these ships and safely navigate them up and down the river, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is a tedious game to navigate such ships, but as anyone who is watching these ships can attest, it is hard not to be awestruck by their majesty and size.

Remember to stay clear of these ships. A small sailboat under sail is used to enjoying the right of way when passing or being overtaken by power vessels, but you lose that privilege

when it comes to these ships. Basically, all small recreational boats lose the right of way to ships in the river when the ships are underway or when they are towed. When you stop in the middle of the channel to eat your lunch, it is common to look upstream or downstream and suddenly spot a ship not far off that you didn't see before. And just because you didn't hear that ship coming up behind you, doesn't mean it isn't there.

Furthermore, these ships can't stop or move out of the way. Common sense dictates that you get out of the way, but so do boating laws. Even when a small vessel breaks down in the channel, it is important to get out of the shipping channel by moving as far out of the middle of the channel as possible and avoid a further accident. You need to be sure to give them plenty of room to navigate past you.

Last summer, the *Empress of the Seas*, a 692-foot-long, 100-foot-wide cruise ship left its berth at the old Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. Shortly after launching, with many people waving from the departing ship, recreational boaters wanted to wish the ship well in its journey to the open sea. They began to follow too closely to the ship, and some boats came just up alongside the ship. Many of the boats got too close for comfort for the ship's captain and crew. One boat in particular got so close that the

boat operator could almost have reached out and touched the cruise ship's bow. This small boat was less than 16 feet long, compared to this 692-foot-long ship. The operator and passengers of the small boat were so caught up in the commotion that they began to raise up beers in salute to the ship's passengers. They even began to greet the passengers with many different forms of greeting, all the while not realizing just how close to the ship's propellers they had steered.

Deputy Waterways Conservation Officer Peter Thomas and I did pay attention to their position. We were watching them from our patrol boat. We signaled them to move away from the ship and conducted a boarding. After a safety inspection, we found the operator and the two passengers to be under the influence of alcohol. The operator was arrested for boating under the influence of alcohol and the boat was towed back to shore.

Make sure while you are enjoying your boating this summer on the Delaware River to watch those ships from a safe distance and keep a clear head. Don't drink and boat. ☐



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photo-WCO Lewis Sweigart