

WCO Diary

by WCO
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Our July 13 boat patrol of Lake Arthur began like any other. The air was hot, as it had been for the last month. The noise and commotion of boat traffic earlier in the day seemed to disappear with the setting sun, and an eerie quiet fell upon the lake. As the sunlight surrendered to darkness, dozens of anchor lights danced on the black water, like stars in the sky. What were once boats became only shadows that melted into the grays of night.

The calm of night was deceiving. Past experience told me that it was a good night to pursue boating violations. The summer air drew squadrons of annoying insects into the glow of our navigation lights, and we still heard hybrid striped bass slapping the surface in pursuit of shallow-swimming alewife schools. Boat fishermen were out in force, and they might be tempted to turn off their navigation lights to avoid the bugs, as well as keep their secret fishing locations hidden.

With Game Commission Deputy Dan Eishenbaugh aboard, I brought my patrol boat to trolling speed and maneuvered into deeper water in search of late-night fishing and boating activity. WCO James Ammon and DWCO Tom Wharry arrived from Lawrence County to conduct shore patrol in conjunction with our efforts. They checked shore anglers along North Shore Drive and the PA Route 528 causeway.

Scanning the lake, Dan and I noted where boats were located by the glow of their anchor lights. Lights soon disappeared where we had observed them moments before, creating darkened "holes" near other lighted watercraft. "There's one," I said, as I pointed to a distant spot off Nealeys Point. Dan raised his binoculars to confirm my observations, while I corrected our course to intercept the darkened vessel.

This boat operator had made an error in judgment that might have had some very serious consequences. If he had an electrical problem, he should have taken his boat to the nearest shoreline to correct it. If he had turned off his lights intentionally, he was risking a collision with another boat. Regardless of the reason for his blackout condition, his continued presence on the water posed a serious hazard to boating traffic. I instructed Dan to keep a watchful eye as I eased the patrol boat forward.

The operator had placed a potato chip bag over the anchor light to keep the flying insects at bay. Following an inspection of his craft, I explained the hazards associated with boating without navigation lights and issued a citation.

Then the police radio crackled with a transmission from Deputy Wharry, who was on shore patrol at the Route 528 access. "We have a couple of boats in Shannon's Run and Swamp Run Fingers without lights. We're busy with alcohol violations. Are you available?"

We responded immediately. I put the patrol boat on plane and swept widely around Nealeys Point, heading toward Officer Wharry's location.

A methodical patrol of the lake fingers west of the Route 528 access area yielded three additional citations for navigation light violations, one citation for personal flotation devices, and several warnings. It was now 2:30 a.m.

We decided to call it quits and began a slow patrol back to the marina. The night air was getting colder, and a heavy fog lay atop the warm lake water. This bone-chilling mist saturated everything on the patrol boat. The windshield, seats, radios, binoculars and our uniforms dripped with cold condensation. Low visibility now kept our speed down, but we forged ahead doggedly in search of more boating activity.

Through the creeping fog, Dan caught sight of a craft in Lost Cove. Its stern light turned on and off in regular intervals, so I brought the patrol boat about to investigate.

We discovered a gasoline-motorized canoe with wiring problems, and an operator who had been ingesting illicit drugs. Observations, testing and other evidence revealed that he was under the influence of a controlled substance and was unable to operate watercraft safely. Officers Ammon and Wharry, who were still on shore patrol, later assisted with the arrest and processing of this BUI offender.

Our patrol of Lake Arthur on the evening of July 13 had begun like any other patrol, but it didn't end that way. At 6 a.m. on July 14, 14 hours after the patrol had started, we finally headed home. We issued a total of 10 citations and one boat operator had been arrested for BUI. ☐