



## Wake Up and Read the Charts

If you spend a little time around the docks you will hear about skippers putting their boats on the rocks. It happens all the time; for example, a large forty something cruiser cut the corner too tight on its way through Mosquito Pass; this 'oops' resulted in the destruction of both props and the bending of both shafts. Another example, the skipper of a thirty something sailboat tried to enter Blakely Marina when the tide was at minus three feet. This entrance has only eight feet of water at a zero tide, so at minus three feet it had only five feet for the six foot keel to swim through – it didn't work.

These expensive groundings could have been avoided if those skippers had been following two simple rules:

### ✦ Rule 1

#### **Know Where You Are**

Anytime you are underway you should be able locate where you are on a chart within a few seconds.

### ✦ Rule 2

#### **Know What Is Under Your Boat**

This rule requires that you use the information gained in Rule 1 to locate your position on the chart and understand what it is telling you about the waters you are in; depth, rocks, type of bottom, etc. Additionally, know the current tide level, approximately will do, and adjust chart depth accordingly.

These are not official rules written in navigation text books, but following them will go a long way toward keeping your boat and crew safe.

Besides the obvious advantage of preventing groundings, there is another reason why both rules should be practiced in unison; Rule 2 can be used as a double check on Rule 1. For instance, if you are not seeing the depth you expect something is wrong – likely you are not where you think you are.

Here is an example; several years ago my wife and I were sailing in the Gulf Islands; we had a nice wind and our tack was going to take us about 50 yards north of a small island. I looked the chart over and concluded there should be about 70 feet of water as we passed the island. As we closed on the island the depth came up to 50 feet, this inconsistency had us concerned. Then a moment later the depth came up to 30 feet. I yelled, "Get us out of here, turn around now!" My wife, who was at the wheel, quickly turned. This put our sails on the wrong side of the boat and killed our boat speed. We hastily started the engine and powered back the way we came until we got organized. A closer examination of the chart showed we were off a different small island from where I thought and if we had not turned around we would have hit a rock – hard!

There are many different ways to determine your position; take some bearings, a GPS or chart plotter, radar

and visual sightings, just to name a few. Due to the relatively narrow waterways in the Northwest, visual sightings are probably the most common, but they are not always the most accurate. I personally feel using the chart plotter in conjunction with paper charts is the best way to go. I find the paper charts provide more detail and make it easier to 'look ahead' for planning purposes while the chart plotter provides a great indication of current position. A word of warning, the chart plotter can be mesmerizing and a distraction; use it mainly for a quick verification of position and keep your eyes on the road – so to speak.

But if the chart plotter breaks, and it will, you need have good, old fashioned navigation skills to fall back on. And knowing where you are is only half the challenge; you also need to understand what the charts are telling you. So, if you are not experienced at navigation and/or chart reading, get some training. There are great courses and training materials available. Here are some resources:

✦ You can take a cruising course from a local school; these courses cover a wide range of skills, including navigation. Go to *48 North's* site for some links: [www.48north.com](http://www.48north.com)

✦ Sailing Associations – Both ASA (American Sailing Assoc.) and US Sailing have websites you can use to find a school near you or contact them to get a home study navigation course. [www.asa.com](http://www.asa.com) and [www2.ussailing.org](http://www2.ussailing.org)

✦ The Power Squadron offers courses. Check for the unit in your local area. <http://www.usps.org>

✦ Navigation schools offer courses on the net and locally. See the [Instruction](#) section of *48° North Classifieds*.

*Mike Huston teaches sailing for San Juan Sailing in Bellingham, WA. He owns a Jeanneau 43DS, "Illuminé."*