



safe boating hints on

Colorado River



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DEPARTMENT OF BOATING AND WATERWAYS

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The River

A 233-mile stretch of the Colorado River has become a year-round recreation area for motorboaters, paddlers, water-skiers, and fishermen. To enjoy a safe trip on the Colorado, boaters need to become familiar with the characteristics of the area that make boating on this desert waterway unique. In addition, since the river forms a natural boundary between California and Arizona, boaters should know the boating laws for both states. Boaters are advised to travel downstream on the California side of the river and upstream on the Arizona side.

The Lakes

Eight major dams located along the river back up extensive bodies of water to create desert lakes such as Havasu, Squaw, Moovalya, and the tule areas of Martinez and Ferguson lakes.

The water in larger lake basins gets rough on windy days and many boaters take shelter in coves found along the shores. However, boaters should beware of becoming trapped in the path of flash flood waters rushing down the washes into the coves during rare, but sudden, rainstorms.

The Parker Strip

Lake Moovalya, created by Parker Dam to the north and Headgate Rock Dam to the south, accounts for a number of boating accidents on the California side of the Colorado. This 10-mile-long, 400-foot-wide body of water is perhaps better known as "The Parker Strip." A majority of accidents on The Strip involved motorboats under 20 feet in length. These accidents are usually the result of improper lookout, operator inattention or carelessness, intoxicated operation, or illegal skiing practices.

Citations will be issued to boats emitting a noise level above 86 decibels at 50 feet on the Arizona side. The noise level requirements for boats operating on the California side of the river is determined by the year the boat engine was manufactured, but in no instance can the noise level exceed 86 decibels. See the "ABCs of the California Boating Law" for legal noise limits.

Hazards

Boaters must be constantly alert for underwater and partially submerged hazards such as sandbars, rocks, or snags on the Colorado. In areas where fast currents empty into lakes, such as the north basin of Lake Havasu, it is not uncommon to find floating, partially submerged tree stumps that can measure ten feet or more in length. Because water levels fluctuate both seasonally and daily, the visibility of hazards in the water can vary. Sandbars continually change position as the current disturbs the river's sandy bottom. The current varies from 2 to 8 mph depending on the area, season, and amount of water being released from dams upstream.

Few aids to navigation exist on portions of the Colorado. A typical "snag warning" may be a bottle tied to the limb of a submerged cottonwood by a conscientious fisherman. Shoals and sandbars usually are not marked, so BE ALERT.

Rafters are quite common on the river. Since they can be difficult to see, motorboaters should be on the lookout for rafts and proceed with caution.

Stretches of the river suitable for paddle craft are: below Hoover Dam to Lake Mojave and Davis Dam to Lake Havasu, below Parker Dam, below Headgate Rock Dam to the weir or diversion dam near Blythe, and below the weir to Imperial Dam near Yuma, Arizona.

Speed Limit

Posted speed limits along the Colorado are rare, but California law restricts speed under certain conditions. Boats must slow to 5 mph when passing within 100 feet of any bather and when within 200 feet of any bathing beach, swimming or diving platform, or landing float in use.

Since the Colorado River is one of the state's most crowded waterways, boaters should always travel at a safe speed and maintain a proper lookout to avoid other watercraft, water-skiers, or swimmers on the river.



Bill Brennan Photo

Water-skiers and motorboats crowd the narrow Parker Strip each season.

Water-Skiing

California boating law requires that:

■ One U.S. Coast Guard-approved Type I, II, III, or V life jacket must be carried for each person on board. Personal watercraft riders, skiers and anyone being towed behind a vessel must wear their life jackets. (Exceptions: performers skiing on a marked course, or barefoot, jump or trick water skiing, may instead wear a wetsuit designed for the activity and labeled by the manufacturer as a water ski wetsuit. However, for each skier who elects to wear a wetsuit, an approved Type I, II, III, or V life jacket must still be carried on board. Persons using any underwater maneuvering device are exempt from wearing a life jacket. An underwater maneuvering device is any towed or self-powered apparatus designed for underwater use that a person can pilot through diving, turning and surfacing maneuvers.) Note: Inflatable personal flotation devices are not approved for use in California while water-skiing.

■ The water-ski flag must be displayed to indicate any of the following conditions:

- A downed skier.
- A skier in the water preparing to ski.
- A ski line extended from the vessel.
- A ski in the water in the vicinity of the vessel.

■ Skiing after sunset and before sunrise is prohibited.

Arizona boating law requires that:

- A skier must wear a life-saving device while skiing.
- The observer must display a red or orange flag, no less than 12 by 12 inches and mounted on a handle, any time a skier is down in the water.

Watch for signs or buoys on the river marking areas where water-skiing is prohibited. Within the Cibola National Wildlife Refuge, skiing is permitted on the main channel but not on the Old River Channel or back water area near Walter's or Mitchell's Camps. Water-skiing is not allowed in the Imperial National Wildlife Refuge, except for an eight-mile strip through the Picacho State Recreation Area and a four-mile section at the southern end of the refuge near Martinez Lake. Water-skiing is also not permitted in the Havasu National Wildlife Refuge. The restricted zone is marked with buoys from the Santa Fe Railroad Bridge (at the Interstate Highway 40 crossing) south to Clear Bay.

Never ski around blind bends. An approaching vessel or other hazard may endanger a skier.

Dams

Dams should make you think twice—danger! Stay away from spillways, outlets, and siphons. Boats approaching dams from upstream have gone over the spillway with disastrous results. The downstream side can be turbulent, causing loss of control that may draw a boat into the dam spillway.

Most dams have buoys and log booms or cables stretched across the water on the up and downstream sides. The booms or cables may be difficult to see even in daylight. Cables on a dam approach can be suddenly lethal if not seen.



A downstream view of Headgate Rock Dam with the water level lowered at the dam.

Weather

The Colorado runs through some of the hottest desert terrain in the Southwest. Temperatures often exceed 110 degrees in the summer. The clear blue sky—and subsequent direct sun rays—should be taken into account when planning your outing.

Bridges

All Colorado River bridges have ample clearance for most pleasure boats, although local information may be advisable in a few cases. Many bridges are built on pilings that restrict channels to a narrow passageway. Fatalities have resulted from boats striking such pilings or being carried against them by the current. When running a narrow passage near a bridge, slow down and be alert for debris that tends to gather around pilings.

For Assistance

There are several ways to obtain assistance. The quickest remedy may be to seek the aid of a passing boat. Flares, smoke, blinking lights, or waving arms have helped many a boater in need of help.

In an emergency, both the California and Arizona county sheriff departments and the Arizona State Game and Fish Department are the primary search and rescue agencies for the river. These agencies can be contacted by dialing 9-1-1.

It is recommended that you leave a float plan with a responsible person who will notify the authorities if necessary. Include in the plan your launch site, destination, description of your boat, CF number, and expected time of return.

Boating and Alcohol

Alcohol is a major contributing factor in many boating accidents, injuries, and fatalities on the Colorado River. Studies indicate that the hazardous side-effects of alcohol are more pronounced when operating a boat. Alcohol, combined with wind, heat, boat noise, vibration, wave action, and sun-glare, has an adverse influence on your judgment and response time in boating. Do not drink and operate a boat.

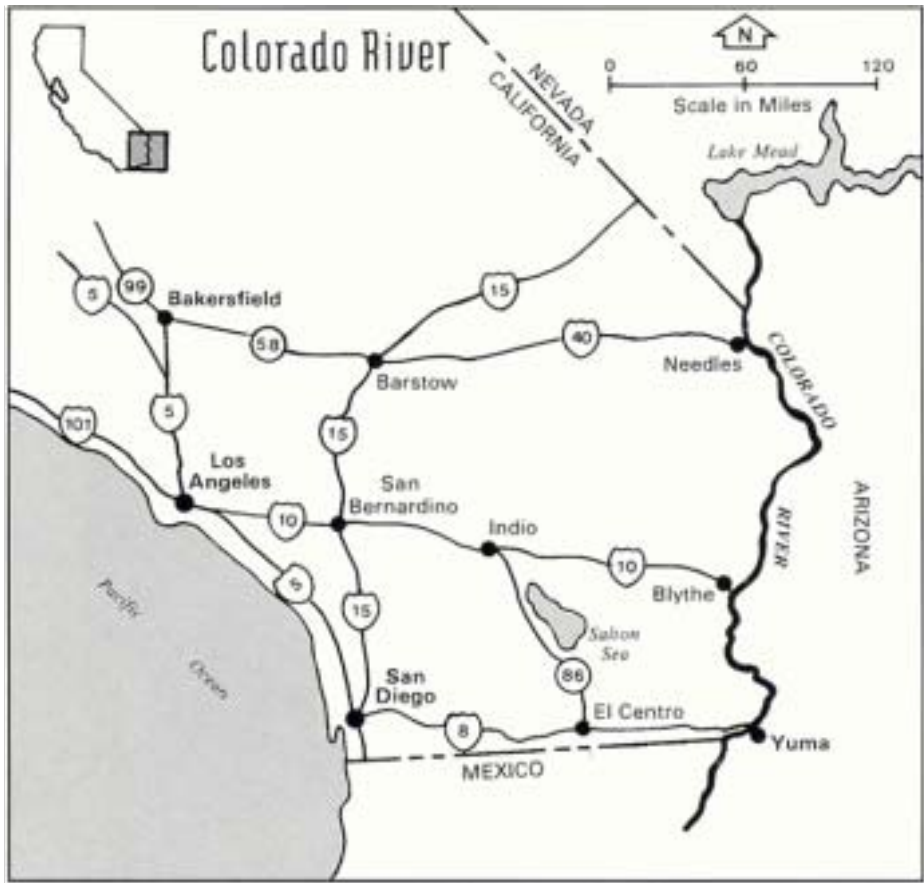
Bow Riding

There are many dangerous boating practices that commonly occur on the Colorado River. Heading the list of dangerous practices is bow riding, which is both unsafe and illegal. Passengers riding on the front of a boat can be killed or severely injured by a boat's propeller if they fall, slip, or are thrown into the water. The law restricts riding on the bow, gunwale, or transom of a powerboat where there is no protective railing or other deterrent to falling overboard or if riding on the bow is an obvious danger.

Additional Information

The California Department of Boating and Waterways has several free boating safety pamphlets that Colorado River boaters might find helpful: "ABCs of the California Boating Law," "Quiet Boating," "Personal Flotation Devices," "Paddlecraft," and "Water-Skiing." Also available are two Boating Trail Guides to the Colorado River: "From Blythe to Imperial Dam" and "From Davis Dam to Parker Dam."

For a free copy of the "Arizona Boating Guide," write the Arizona Game and Fish Department, 2221 W. Greenway Road, Phoenix, Arizona 85023, phone (602) 789-3235, or visit www.azgfd.com.



BOATING SAFETY CLASSES explaining required and recommended equipment for small boats and offering training in good seamanship are conducted throughout California by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the U.S. Power Squadrons and certain chapters of the American Red Cross. For information on Coast Guard Auxiliary and Power Squadron classes, call (800) SEA-SKIL (732-7545) or (800) 368-5647. The Department of Boating and Waterways offers a free home study course entitled *California Boating Safety Course*. For more information, e-mail us at pubinfo@dbw.ca.gov, or phone (916) 263-1331 or tollfree (888) 326-2822, or write: Department of Boating and Waterways, 2000 Evergreen Street, Suite 100, Sacramento, California 95815-3888. **Visit our Website at www.dbw.ca.gov.**