

# Trawler watch-standing

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEFF MERRILL



Above, a modern pilothouse with multiple screens can put out considerable light. Dimming the screens helps preserve your night vision. Right, a tidy instrument cluster on a Selene 59.

**W**atch-standing is a shared responsibility with all who take the helm. The safety of the crew and the security of the vessel need to be your priority. Remember, some very small decisions you make can have large consequences.

When I teach power cruising offshore classes, I have summarized the duty of the watch stander simply as this: Make sure you have water under the keel, and don't hit anything. While this is true, there are obviously many other aspects and details to consider.

Prior to leaving the dock, I like to meet with the crew to go over our intended trip, time, distance offshore, expectations, etc., and set up the

watch schedule. Expectations and responsibilities need to be clearly understood, and it is wise to do an orientation and review so each crewmember is comfortable. I have a form I print out and fill in the skipper names for each time slot and then post that in the galley (it won't be missed if you tape it to the refrigerator). During the day, there always needs to be one person who has the helm and is the designated skipper, but typically the schedule allows for overlaps and conversation. Running at night,

however, you are typically on your own. Shifts at night can be lonely, which makes them feel like time is slowing down and stretching out. I suggest you break up the assignments so that no crewmember has a solo watch that exceeds three or four hours.

Personally, I like to prepare for my watch well in advance so that I arrive 10 to 15 minutes ahead of when my shift is scheduled to begin. Make sure you have a timed alarm set so you don't oversleep or forget; the person who is completing their shift is really looking forward to seeing you and turning over command.

What you should actually monitor in the pilothouse and look for in the engine room to make sure everything works is a separate, more in-depth discussion perhaps for another time. I like to keep track of the details by recording data hourly in two different logs: one a



paper trail “Underway Log” in the pilothouse (that includes penciling in positions on the paper charts), and the other an “Engine Room Inspection” spreadsheet on a clipboard in the engine room.

### Start in the engine room

My preference is for the oncoming watch stander to “wake up” and get into the game by starting in the machinery spaces, reviewing equipment and completing that checklist by filling in the details before reporting to the pilothouse. During the day it is easier to conduct engine room checks more regularly on the

hour, but at night I spread this out and like to require an engine room check once per watch and have it completed before taking the helm. If you are the only one awake and running the ship in the pilothouse, it is very difficult to leave that station for much longer than a quick head break; you typically do not have enough time to also visit the engine room.

Arrive light (visit the head), refreshed (snack and drink)



Make sure you get checked out on all the gear before it's time to stand watch.

and ready to be in charge. The duty of staying on course and keeping everything running smoothly should be enough to keep you occupied. Some people bring minimally distracting entertainment like pencil puzzles and music, but it's too easy to miss out on something important if you

## Watch-standing tips

- Before you depart, and certainly before you change watch standers, make sure the oncoming watch stander knows how to talk via VHF, steer with the autopilot, interpret the radar to track targets, understand the rules of the road, and sound the horn five times for danger or an emergency.

- On a passage, run at a steady rpm. Agree up front with the crew that if there is a change in rpm, that means to assemble in the pilothouse. This is a signal that everyone will “feel” and is the safest way I know to communicate to a

fellow crew in the engine room that they need to get out.

- Be comfortable, but don't get too relaxed. Falling asleep by resting your eyelids, especially after dark, is too tempting. If you are getting tired, chew ice or ask for a replacement.

- They do call it watch-standing, and though you are very comfortable sitting down on the job, make it a habit to stand up every 15 minutes — or at least every 30 minutes. This will get your blood flowing and help keep you alert and fresh.

- Divide each hour into four

quadrants. I like to update the ship's log on the top of the hour at 00, stand up and physically look in all directions at 15 and 45, and listen to the weather update on VHF at the bottom of the hour, 30.

- Be aware that 15 minutes is all the time it takes for a fast-moving ocean freighter to appear out of nowhere from over the horizon and intercept your course. Some trawlers keep a 15-minute egg timer in the house and reset it after each ding to make sure they remember to scan the horizon four times an hour.

- Don't forget to look behind you — traffic can approach from all directions.

- Learn how to operate the tracking features on your radar/chartplotter so you can acquire and track targets to determine closest possible approach (CPA) and time to closest possible approach (TCPA).

- As a general rule, try to stay one mile apart from any target when offshore.

As a final note, there is no shame in asking for help. If you have any doubt, get the captain involved in decision-making.

*Jeff Merrill*

## POWER VOYAGING



Most flybridges have a duplicate set of instruments and controls.

are reading a book or watching a movie — you really need to keep your personal visual and audio “antenna” in full receiving mode. The off-watch crew has checked out and put their

trust in you, so don't let them down.

When I come on watch, I like to first debrief with the current watch stander to learn where surrounding vessel traffic is located, what the weather is doing and how the ship's systems are operating. There should be a few minutes of time spent reviewing this information. Confirm the speed and heading of nearby targets on the radar (are they approaching or did they pass?). Understand the course (time and distance to the next way-

point) and the nav/com (are you a “course up” or a “North up” plotter?). And, review any mechanical concerns (a rogue vibration, oil leak on the generator, etc.) to ensure a smooth handover takes place.

### Gauge check

My first task once settled is to scan all of the displays to view their current status. When the pilothouse is “dialed-in,” I am looking for reference lines on analog gauges to show that the needle is where it is supposed to be on temperatures and pres-

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tures. Confirm the voltage and amperage displays on the electrical panel — are the appropriate breakers on or off? At night it is easy to point the flashlight at one display at a time to mentally check them off.

I'll be reviewing the watch-standing points in the accompanying sidebar in much more detail in 2019 when I present my "Offshore Essentials" course at each TrawlerFest venue. I hope you can attend! If you would like a copy of my three- and four-person watch-standing schedule, please

send me an email and include "JMYS Watch Standing Schedule" in the subject line. ■

*Jeff Merrill, CPYB, is the president of Jeff Merrill Yacht Sales, Inc. - www.JMYS.com. He is a veteran yacht broker who provides individual attention and worldwide professional representation to buyers and sellers of premium brand, oceangoing trawlers. Merrill is active in the cruising community as a public speaker and writer and enjoys spending time at sea with clients. Jeff has written several articles for*



Ocean Navigator's Power Voyaging column and is constantly looking for new ideas to improve and simplify the trawler lifestyle. If you have a suggestion or want to get in touch, please email Merrill at [Jeff.Merrill@JMYS.com](mailto:Jeff.Merrill@JMYS.com).

Be sure to check electrical consumption and breakers.

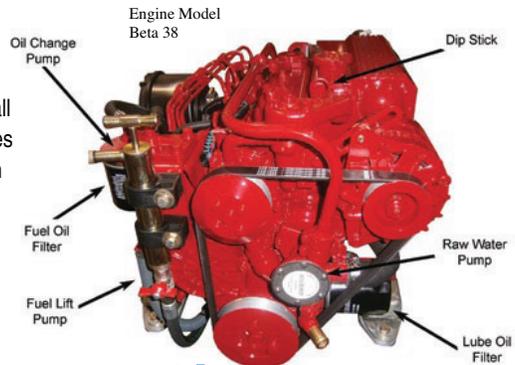
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	Cape Dory 28
Beta 16	Catalina 30
	Tartan 30
Beta 20	Catalina 30
	Contessa 32
	Island Packet 27
	Pearson Vanguard
Beta 25	Alberg 35
	Morgan OI 33
	Alberg 37
	Pearson 35

Engine Model	Vessel
Beta 30	Catalina 36
Beta 38	Sabre 38Mk1
	Valiant 37
	Westsail 32
Beta 43	Hinckley B40
	Valiant 40
Beta 50	Bristol 41.1
	Morgan 41 OI
	Morgan 45
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