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Is your safety gear up to scratch?

PHOTOS NICK DAY

Safety equipment is expensive and God forbid that you ever have to use it, but if you do, you want to know it's going to work. Duncan Wells reminds us what to do and the general checks we need to make to stay safe.

I always try to look after my lifebuoys and danbuoy and recommend storing them inside the boat when you're not at sea. That way, batteries and bulbs will survive and the dreaded U/V won't do its deadly damage.

So, where to start? Check the bulb cover on the lifebuoy light. It's a favourite place for gathering water, as you can see in the photo (Pic 1).

Check that it's even still there (Pic 2). This one is missing altogether.

This owner has decided to clip his lifebuoy light on in the upright position (Pic 3), the position that triggers the light when it's deployed, so he won't get any water in the cap. However, he clearly hasn't got any batteries in the light, otherwise it would be on. I'm not sure what he's gaining by doing this. It would be best to stow lifebuoy and light inside until he gets underway.

Put it away!

If you stow your safety gear inside the boat and out of the weather after a sail, you can always check it for wear and tear as you do so and dry it out if the conditions have been bad.

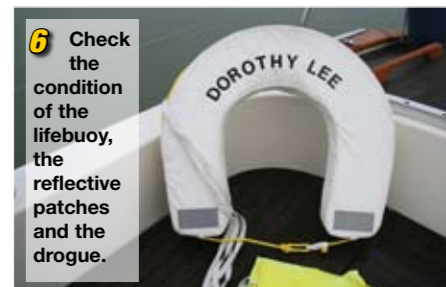
Gear left on the pushpit doesn't last long and I would worry if I had to use this lot in an emergency (Pic 4).

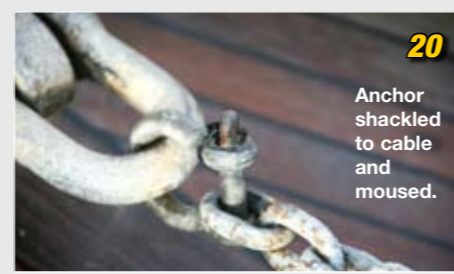
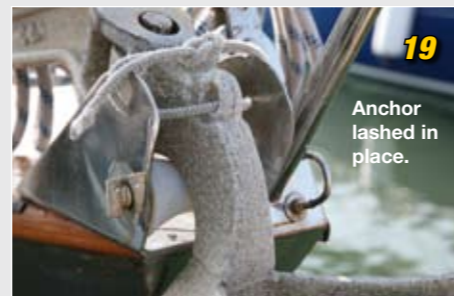
I remove the batteries from the lifebuoy lights so they don't corrode while I'm not looking. I put them into the lights and check them only when we're ready to go to sea. That way I know they will work when needed. Most safety gear is expensive and to leave it rotting and rusting on the rail is a terrible waste. It also leads to a false sense of security.

Lifebuoys, Danbuoys and Jonbuoys can be stored in a nice warm and dry saloon while the boat is in her berth and only be deployed when you sail (Pic 5 and 6).

You need to take care of other safety equipment too if you want it to work.

As James Turner explains on page 98, lifejackets need to be checked (Pic 7). If automatic and fitted with a gas cylinder, we need to make sure this is in date and that it is not rusty. Cylinders should be replaced at the recommended time (Pic 8). Lifejackets get salty and this can rot the fabric. Manually inflate the lifejacket to check for leaks (Pic 9), check the seams and make sure the reflective patches are in »





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Jackstay webbing strap lashed to aft secure point.

Anchor lashed in place.

Anchor shackled to cable and moused.

Jackstay webbing strap shackled to secure deck point forward and moused.

place. To clean off the salt and sand collected during the year, I would rinse it with fresh water. As long as the lifejacket is inflated it will prevent the gas canister from going off – I believe this works for jackets that fire on contact with water; it certainly does for the hydrostatically fired version. Then we need to check that any light fitted to the lifejacket is in date **Pic 10** and that the whistle is there.

Flares need to be kept in a canister or, better still, in a nice padded attache case, which not only keeps them dry, but stops them rattling about. We also need to check they're in date **(Pic 11)**. It's worth having a maintenance notebook with a list of all the expiry and service dates, so you don't forget anything **(Pic 12)**.

The liferaft needs to be serviced by a professional safety company. The next service date will be written on it **(Pic 13)**. Any hydrostatic release system that you have in place to deploy the liferaft automatically needs to be checked to see that it's in date. Again expiry dates will be listed on the equipment **(Pic 14)**.

Fire extinguishers should be serviced annually; they have expiry dates, so you need to check them regularly **(Pic 15)**. This one expires at the end of 2010.

Jackstays. Check for chafing and wear. Check the anchor points forward and aft.

Jackstays should be attached by a moused shackle forward **(Pic 16)** and a lashing aft **(Pic 17)** so they can be cut away quickly in an emergency. Guardrails likewise should be attached to the pushpit by a system that you can lose in a hurry. You might need to get rid of the guardrail to roll a MOB back on board, for example. A lashing is preferable. I actually leave the tensioning bottlescrews without securing pins so they can be unscrewed with a few turns **(Pic 18)**.

Lifelines and harnesses. Check the strapping for wear and chafe. Check that the caribeeners close properly.

Don't forget that safety isn't just about the equipment available to help us get out of trouble. Making sure we don't get into trouble in the first place is the best policy, so let's check the boat and the systems and make sure they're not likely to fail. All pilots 'walk the plane' before flying and we should do the same by 'walking the boat'. If we start at the bows, we can check that the anchor is lashed in place **(Pic 19)** and won't suddenly leap off the bow roller and anchor us when we least expect it. Check that it's attached by moused shackle to the anchor cable **(Pic 20)** and that it's attached to the boat at the bitter end by a lashing or narrow diameter rope **(Pic 21)** that we would cut if we needed to lose the anchor and cable in a hurry. Check that the forestay is attached at the stemhead by a stout clevis pin and

that it has a retaining split pin through it that's been bent back or is secured by a split ring **(Pic 22)**. The same goes for any inner forestays. Check the port and starboard navigation lights while you're at the bows, then make sure the steaming light is working, check the tricolour if you have one and the anchor light. Remember, at night, anchor light on and nothing else when you're anchored (under 50m); navigation lights, which are port and starboard lights and stern light, when you're sailing, or tricolour, but never both, and steaming light and nav lights (no tricolour) when you're under engine, whether you have any sail up or not **(Diags 1-4)**.

Amidships, check the shrouds and stays and make sure that the bottlescrews are attached to the chainplates by clevis pins and that they all have a retaining pin that's been bent back so it can't slide out **(Pic 23)**. Sometimes for safety these are gelled as well. We don't want a shroud to come loose, which can lead to disaster and the rig being lost. At the mast, check all the halyards, reefing lines, downhauls, uphauls, kickers or any rope that runs over a sheave and make sure that the rope hasn't become worn and frayed at this point **(Pic 24)**. Blue water sailors tend to move their halyards by about a foot every month to avoid constant wear on one specific point as it goes round a sheave.

After all, if a halyard breaks, you're more than likely going to have to climb the mast to reeve off a new one.

While we're by the shrouds, let's check their tension to make sure that all is well.

We want to check our sails too, to make sure they're in good condition, and this can be done in the berth or in sheltered water. Sails can take a lot of wear and tear. This No 2 Genoa **(Pic 25)** was ripped in the 2003 Round the Island Race when it was already over 10 years old and is still going strong today. It's my favourite singlehanded sail, because it's an all rounder and you can see under it as well as round it. It costs about £120 a year to repair, but it keeps going.

Passing the cockpit reminds us that we can service our own winches. Using the manual, take them apart carefully and apply the grease as directed. Mast winches also need to be serviced.

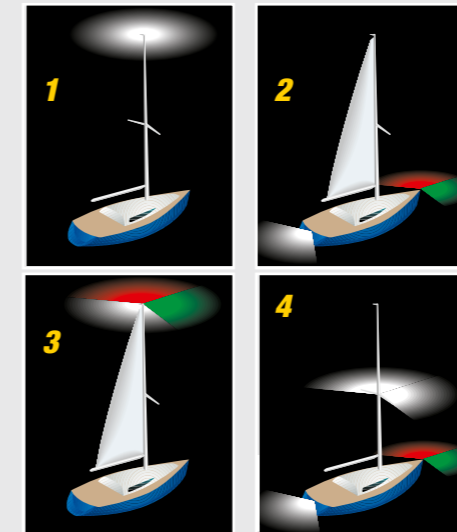
Check that the backstay is attached



21 We can cut the anchor cable free if necessary.



Lights at Night: diagrams



(Vessels under 20m only)
1: at anchor, anchor light only. 2: under sail, port and starboard nav lights and stern light. 3: under sail, tricolour only. 4: under power (even if you have any sail up), nav lights, stern light, steaming light.

securely and that a bent split pin or split ring is holding the clevis pin in place **(Pic 26)**.

Cast an eye over all ropes and lines to make sure they aren't frayed and chafed. Putting ropes into a pillow case and then running them through the washing machine at 40° is frowned on by the experts who say that the bashing they get from the spin drying can cause a 'huckle' – a lump in the stranding or braiding of the rope, which weakens it – but I can never get ropes to feel really good and clean by placing them in a bucket of fresh cold water and rinsing them. I much prefer the fresh and soft feel after they've been machine washed, especially if I've added a little fabric softener. And they smell nice too! This is probably sacrilege to some, but then this is *Sailing Today* where we



tell it like it is. So far I haven't mentioned engines and outboards, which also need to be serviced annually.

Inboard engines need to have the standard daily maintenance of checking the engine oil, gearbox oil level, tension in the alternator belt, the level of fresh water in the header tank and the raw water filter for weed. Then check to make sure water is coming out of the exhaust once the engine has been started.

Batteries, where required, need to be topped up with distilled water. Keep things serviced and safe and remember if you look after your safety equipment, it will surely look after you.



25 Oops!



If you want to rely on your liferaft in an emergency, make sure you have it serviced regularly, according to the manufacturer's service intervals.