

TIPS

from
the pros



Photos by William Webber

Preview

If you're a serious boater you want to feel confident that you're getting the most out of your electronics. Instruction manuals and videos are good at helping pump up your familiarity, but experience is hard to beat. With that in mind, we asked mariners who spend a lot of time on the water—commercial fishermen—along with electronics dealers and manufacturers for tips on operating the equipment at top efficiency. Here's what they said:

BY MIKE CROWLEY

The Alaska gillnet boat is a marvelously efficient machine. It's able to pack thousands of pounds of salmon in its hold, carry a big net reel on deck, maybe some processing equipment and accommodations for a captain and crew, all on a very fast boat under 35 feet.

Packing a load of fish or with empty holds, the aluminum gillnetter—there are some fiberglass gillnetters, but most are aluminum—quickly comes out of the hole, gets on a plane and hangs there at 25 or 26 knots.

Running among Alaska gillnetters is not where you want to be when the fog sets in. Salmon openings can be short and a lot of money is made or lost on quick decisions, so sunlight or fog, off Egegik in Bristol Bay or the Copper River, the gillnetter is pushed to its limit. Pea-soup fog might slow some boats to 12 or 14 knots, but others are still notched in at over 20 knots.

Running at even 14 knots when you can't see much past the bow rollers means you need radar that provides excellent discrimination; a mile is all you need, but you better be able to see everything that's happening within that mile. The trouble is, a gillnetter is a planing craft with a wide range of hull attitudes, and a radar that's pointed at the heavens won't see boats approaching at a high rate of speed. This is a distinct disadvantage.

The typical bow picker (a gillnet boat that hauls its net over the bow) has a planing attitude that varies 20 degrees or so, from sitting in the water, getting under power to getting on step,





When time is money, speed is important, and gillnetters like this aluminum bowpicker operate at 20 knots or so even in dense fog. Making sure the radar is performing at peak efficiency is critical.

says Bill Webber, a Copper River salmon fisherman and boatbuilder in Cordova, Alaska.

He tends to “push it,” as he says, even in the worse situations, so Webber, and many other gillnetters, have learned to adjust their radar antennas accordingly.

“When you are running in the fog, the antenna needs to be tipped down further than it would in a displacement [non-planing] boat,” Webber says. He angles his antenna down about 4 degrees to give him the radar coverage he needs. As he changes speed, Webber also makes adjustments to the radar controls, primarily the gain, which brings the sidelopes down to the surface.

We’re not recommending that recreational boaters take a wrench to their antennas and tip them down, but you may want to discuss the topic of radar angle with your electronics dealer if your boat spends half its time idling along in calm water and the other half screaming across the waves with the bow pointing skyward.

Familiarity breeds confidence

Lew Grant of Lew Grant/Omni Electronics in Rockland, Maine, says that most pleasure boaters could get a lot more out of their electronic equipment. Gaining confidence in the electronics surrounding the helm station comes from using electronics as much as possible under all conditions. For example, Grant advises not to wait until the fog rolls in before learning how to use the radar. One of the first things a professional skipper will do is to flip on the radar before pulling away from the dock, even on a sunny day.

Reaching a comfort level with your electronics is important. Commercial fishermen tend to get there fairly quickly, says Simrad’s Mike Hillers. He explains that they “[adjust their electronics] to the point they feel comfortable with, then they don’t spend a lot of time messing with it.” Boaters who don’t spend as much time on the water as the commercial

guys tend to “fiddle” with their electronics.

Greater familiarity with onboard electronics also means making fuller use of the equipment’s features. Take the ARPA (Automatic Radar Plotting Aid) and AIS (Automatic Identification System) radar options, for example. Commercial operators are more apt to keep track of ARPA targets—“move them” to a plotter and type in the name of a boat, Hillers says.

“The professional [mariner] takes the target out to his plotter and tracks him,” says Furuno’s Steve Bradburn. “He can tell by the speed [of the target] what he’s doing, if he’s dragging, if he’s running.” He assumes that if the target is going back and forth over the same grounds then the fishing is probably good at that spot.

ARPA and AIS

In contrast, recreational operators often depend on visual sightings rather than taking advantage of what ARPA offers. “If he sees a group of boats, he’ll head in that direction,” expecting to find fish, Bradburn says.

Granted there’s an expense here that the owner of a small pleasure boat might not want to be burdened with since “You need at least a 6-kilowatt radar to paint and hold ARPA targets,” Bradburn says. However, there’s little doubt that an ARPA-equipped radar is a good investment because of the additional safety it provides. Hillers says ARPA is a big help for anyone who, for example, has difficulty determining their speed and course relative to another vessel—do you speed up or slow down and go behind that ferry up ahead?

The situation is a little different for AIS. Very few owners of high-end yachts put AIS receivers on their boats. One advantage of AIS over ARPA for the recreational boat owner is that “the information is there. You don’t have to acquire anything. No key strokes are involved,” Hillers says. Though with a receiver priced at \$500 to \$1,000 these aren’t going on small recreation boats.

But for a yacht owner or sport fisherman spending time in and around shipping lanes, an AIS receiver could avert an unfortunate encounter.



“Sonars aren’t good at picking up salmon, but they will pick up schools of bait. Find the bait and there’s a good possibility that salmon are hanging around.”

Fishfinders: a deeper view



ishfinders are another piece of equipment that can provide a lot of information if used to its fullest.

Dave Church at Si-Tex Marine Electronics suggests that instead of using a fishfinder to just spot fish in the water column, use it to determine bottom contours and hardness to find areas where fish inhabit. Even if the sounder doesn't display the presence of fish, the professional fisherman often knows that fish are likely present and continues searching for them instead of moving on if they don't immediately show on a sounder's display.

There's fish and then there's a lot of fish, and it's the latter that commercial operators search for. To tell how dense a school of fish is, a sounder with good color differentiation is essential. Webber, the Alaska fisherman, remembers having an early sounder with limited shades of red—red denoting denser levels of fish—and then buying another brand with more shades of red.

On the first machine, it was hard to tell the densities at all, he says, while it was much easier on the second machine. "You could actually see where the schools were thicker and thicker. It would change almost to blood red."

When looking for fish, commercial operators also use the plotter for more than simply getting from one point to another. "The pleasure boat guy pretty much just uses it for navigation. He uses it for setting up routes and lets the computer steer the boat, perhaps through places they shouldn't be," Grant says.

Professionals use the plotter to record such things as hangs and bad ground. "And they'll mark where their strings are and have been, year after year, giving kind of a history," Bradburn says. "Recreational guys have a tendency to do more waypoints. They want to go to a specific point and fish," he says, while commercial fishermen are more interested in an area.

A relatively new form of electronic software that some commercial fishermen have used to great advantage is the electronic chart feature that, once it is interfaced with a sounder,



Professional captains and dealers advise boaters to gain confidence with their electronics by making fuller use of their functions. Also, don't wait for a blanketing fog to flip on the radar. Get comfortable with it on sunny days—turn it on before you leave the dock.

allows the user to redraw the bottom,

This technology is especially useful on the West Coast where seismic disturbances have rearranged the seabed since depths and contours were noted on current charts.

In the Bering Sea, trawlers have basically redrawn the bottom using the software. Off Hawaii, Bradburn says a fisherman located and charted a pinnacle that wasn't even on a chart. That's information that only he has, unless he wants to share it.

One area where high-end sportfishing boats have learned from the success of commercial fishermen is the use of sonar. "This is where I see the biggest trend for sportfishing guys," Bradburn says. Plotters might not be used a lot, but sonars are "because they want to search as big a swatch of ocean as possible."

Bradburn has sold sonars to commercial fishermen and sport fishermen working deep-water pinnacles off Hawaii and to West Coast salmon fishermen. Sonars aren't good at picking up salmon, but they will pick up schools of bait. Find the bait and there's a good possibility that salmon are hanging around.

So, whether you're looking for bait, bottom or want to avoid a collision, it never hurts to learn from your neighbor, even if he is a commercial fisherman.

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About the author

Mike Crowley is the longtime boats and gear editor of National Fisherman magazine. Before that he was a commercial halibut fisherman in Alaska. Crowley is co-author of "Down the Shore: Faces of Maine's Coastal Fisheries."

