

Sea Kayaking Dot Net

An online publication for seakayakers around the world. Tips, pointers, helpful hints.

Tuesday, March 17, 2009

🚣 Night Navigation: The Compass



Above: Seattle Sports'

[Nightquest deck compass](#) illuminated with its internal red binnacle light designed to protect night vision.

The sea kayaker navigating at night for the first time faces a small but potent host of challenges.

At a minimum, paddling at night is disorienting. With no clear view of the horizon or landmarks onshore, it's tough to gauge speed and forward progress. Approaching waves and swell are difficult to assess, other boats on the water difficult to detect except by sound or the movement and motion of running lights - red to port, green to starboard, white at masthead or stern.

And as the paddler's sense of hearing makes up for the reduced visibility, the nighttime paddling environment can be spooky. Sounds - the plop of a surfacing fish, the crash of a breaking wave, the drone of a powerboat -- are fraught with significance the kayaker has to assess and interpret.

So much for some of the psychological aspects of nighttime sea kayaking. Let's turn to its logistical aspects. Federal laws ubiquitous enough to be regarded as worldwide and universal require that boats on the water at night, and under a certain length, are required to be able to show a white light.

The light can be as simple as the small [pfd C-light](#) sold by marine suppliers like West Marine etc., for about \$12 US. Or you can use a temporary deck lamp affixed to your fore or aft deck with a suction cup and backup bungee cords.



Above:

The [Nightquest](#) in the light of day. Note suction cup and bungee lanyards.

Some kayakers supplement their nighttime boat illumination with glow sticks, reflective deck lines, or swatches of SOLAS tape on their pfd's front and back shoulders, along the kayakers' gunwales or at the peak of the bow and stern.

Nighttime kayak navigation requires a compass, preferably a foredeck compass that won't get washed overboard by waves or chop and whose card and lubber line are large and well-enough illuminated to be visible in darkness.

The sea kayaker does poorly to rely on a headlamp to read a deck compass at night; likewise, strapping an LED headlamp near the compass to keep the compass illuminated is not a good idea.

A LED headlamp bright enough to illuminate the compass on the foredeck is also bright enough to reduce your range of vision to the cone of light cast across your foredeck.

The best solution for nighttime kayak navigation is a compass illuminated with the same sort of instrument illumination common to larger boats --- powerboats, sailboats, transatlantic cargo ships, the bridge of large vessels that often and typically navigating in darkness. All use low-watt red lights that provide just enough illumination to read the compass, but not so bright as to constrict your eyes' pupils.

One kayaking-specific gear manufacturer, Seattle Sports, out in Seattle, Washington, on the northwest coast of the US, has developed a battery-powered, light sensitive compass.

Affixing to the foredeck by way of a suction cup and back up bungee cords, their NightQuest compass is submersible and equipped with an O-ring gasket to waterproof the internal electronics.

The waterproof binnacle contains a photosensitive switch that turns on a red LED bulb that illuminates the compass card and lubber line. The faint but persistent glow of the red bulb is just bright enough to illuminate the card and lubber line. You can read the compass with dilated eyes still sensitive enough to scan the darkness for landmarks, navigational markers and the running lights of boats on the water.

You can pick up a NightQuest from [Amazon](#) for \$39.00. Free shipping, about \$10.00 less than brick-and-mortar stores. C-lights run between \$10.00 and \$12.00, depending on where you buy.