



By Kate Barker

# Boatylicious!

We all know that “sprucing-up” at the cottage is a euphemism for “working hard” – with the exception of messing about in our boats, that is. Then, spring is the time to take stock, tune up, and begin the summer-long pleasure of hanging around the dock. The bonus: Investing a little TLC now will go a long way to keeping your boat running smoothly all season long.

## THE ELECTRICAL SYSTEM

**battery** This is the heart of your boat’s electrical system and you’ve brought it indoors and charged it at least once over the winter, right? While it’s still out of the boat and easy to work on, don some safety glasses and check the electrolyte levels (the liquid in the battery). Fill as necessary with distilled water to just cover the plates. Clean the battery terminals

with a wire brush or light sandpaper, then apply an anti-corrosion spray. Install the battery in the boat and follow the wiring leading from it to the starter, and from the starter to the ignition switch, ensuring that all connections are tight. Darrell Frausel, service manager at Pride of Muskoka in Bracebridge, advises looking over spark plug wires to make sure that the rubber sheathing that insulates them is intact and that no wires are rubbing against the belts.

**navigation lights** If they won’t come on, and you’ve cleaned and tightened the connections to the battery, get down on your back and check the contacts at the on-off switch, usually located behind the steering wheel. Also check for burnt-out fuses or a tripped circuit breaker, which is generally located under the dash. Make sure the bulbs are good and examine the

Photo by Hugh McLean // Illustrations by Carl Wiens

Help your **boating beauty** reach her potential.  
With our step-by-step guide, you can handle it





## Trouble turning the boat can be caused by stiffness in the steering yoke on which the outdrive or outboard pivots

"HELLO...THAT WAS OUR TURN!"



### "TO DO" THIS SPRING

- 1) Clean and polish: hull sides, deck, and bottom, engine, cockpit, seats, top/cover, fenders, lines
- 2) Clean and/or lubricate: steering, shifter, tilt/trim, electrical switches, pumps, instruments, lights, ignition switch
- 3) Inspect, repair, and/or rebed: loose deck fittings, top hardware, wiring, seat mounts, engine mounts, battery box tie-downs, props

contacts in the bow- and stern-light housings for corrosion, says Scott Brundle, co-owner of Town & Country Marine in Lakefield, Ont. If you still haven't got lights, the problem may be a short circuit or a bad switch and it's time to call in an expert.

What if your starboard is a healthy green, port is glowing red, but your white stern light is snuffed? Patience is the key with finicky stern lights, says Shane Serra, owner of Hot Knots Landing

Marina in Orillia. Manhandle them and they are liable to break off in the posts. If your stern light goes on and off intermittently and is the type that is on a removable pole, try Graham Smith's trick. The mechanic at Harris Boat Works on Rice Lake says there is probably corrosion on the male post on the bottom of the base. With the switch off, he suggests poking a jackknife gently into the hole to spread the connection apart. That will buy you some time but, eventually, you will have to replace the stern light.

### THE STEERING

Is your steering looser or stiffer than it was last fall, or are you unable to turn the wheel completely to the left or right? Moisture may have penetrated the sealed cable over the winter, causing corrosion,



"LIGHTS, CAMERAS... I SAID LIGHTS..."

and the cable will have to be replaced. Trouble turning can also be caused by stiffness in the steering yoke on which the outdrive or outboard pivots. All moving components need to be greased and your owner's manual may recommend a specific kind of grease for lubrication. It's a precise and messy business, though, and even for diehard DIYers, the next stop for both the cable and lube jobs is usually your marina's service department.

### THE ENGINE

**cooling system** Start the engine and do a visual check. On sterndrives, it is particularly important to look for leaks such as spraying or dripping water, which indicate someone forgot to put a plug back in when the engine was serviced over the winter. The result, if not fixed, could be overheating and engine damage.

On an outboard, however, you *want* to see water spouting from the cooling water outlet – a small hole on the side of the engine. This stream of water, sometimes called a telltale, indicates that the cooling system is working. If it isn't, Brundle suggests straightening a paper clip and poking out any gunk that's plugging the hole. There may also be a blockage at the intake – a series of vents in the lower unit of sterndrives and outboards generally located just above the propeller, below the cavitation plate.

If you have a sterndrive, watch the temperature gauge for overheating (this will be easier, of course, if you're familiar with the normal operating range of the gauge on your boat). A broken impeller in the water pump can cause an overheated engine. The impeller should be cleaned regularly and changed every year or two. Make sure that the water-pump drive belt and the alternator belt are tensioned properly; if they're slipping, they're too loose and will need to be adjusted or replaced. Finally, check your oil and fluid levels, including power-steering fluid, and top up as per your engine manual. >>

## It's best to do the buffing by hand, or use a low-speed electric buffer. And be buff yourself; waxing isn't for wimps



### BUT WILL THE SHAME EVER FADE?

**the prop** Driving with a nicked prop is like driving with a huge chunk of rubber out of one tire: The boat's performance will be affected and it will tend to shake. Vibration can cause a variety of mechanical problems and, in severe cases, harm the propeller shaft and shaft seals, permitting water to enter the gear case and oil to leak out into the water. Sending the prop out for repair is a good winter project, but if you just remembered or only noticed the ding now, sub in your spare prop or hold off driving the boat until it's fixed.

### THE HULL

**cleaning** The best time to scrub off scum, sludge, dirt, algae, and all related marine gunk off a fiberglass hull is in the fall, as soon as you pull the boat out of the water. (*Now they tell us.*) If you wait until spring, warns Glen Goodale, technical standards supervisor at Pride of Muskoka, the crud will have stained the hull over time, hardened, and made the job of getting it off a lot tougher. If after a good scrub with a stiff brush the stain still doesn't disappear, it's time to crack out an acid-based fiberglass hull cleaner.

Unless you dock your boat in an area where the water is extremely dirty or

greasy, however, you should be able to keep the underwater surface of your hull clean through the season simply by swimming around the boat and attacking the waterline, where most dirt lingers, with a scrub brush or soapless scouring pad once or twice a year. If that doesn't work to keep the hull bottom free of growth, Grant Jowitt, service manager at Buckeye Marine in Bobcaygeon, Ont., suggests applying a brush-on bottom wax, which is more environmentally friendly and cheaper than anti-fouling paint.

For a list of companies that provide marine products approved by Environment Canada, and displaying the EcoLogo, go to [www.environmental-choice.com](http://www.environmental-choice.com) and click on "Marine Products" under "Products and Criteria." **repair** Surface chips or scratches in the hull that haven't penetrated through

the fiberglass layers under the gelcoat can be sanded and filled with gelcoat filler or gelcoat over an epoxy or polyester resin filler. (Deeper scratches and holes require reconstruction with fiberglass cloth and resin.) As with any finish, preparation and familiarity with your materials is the key to success. The damaged area should be clean and taped off and everything you need for the repair ready at hand. Make sure you know how the finishes work: Some are self-curing, but others, such as epoxy and polyester resins combined with gelcoat, require a catalyst, or hardener, and leave little room for error. For more on how to repair a shallow scratch or chip in a fiberglass hull, visit [cottagelife.com](http://cottagelife.com).

**restoring the colour** If your formerly red hull is now Barbie pink, or leaves a chalky residue on your hand, consider using rubbing compound to help restore the colour. Rubbing compound works by removing the chalking to get down to the original colour, and then blending and polishing. It is available in a variety of grades, from less to more aggressive. Start with the least abrasive and be sure to use a product designed for fiberglass, warns Lori Mason, of The Store Mason's Chandelery in Mississauga. Automotive rubbing compounds contain more silica and are therefore more abrasive.

Another option recommended by Mason is a sealer kit, basically rubbing compound with an acrylic sealer.

**wax** You thought you were finished? Now comes the all-important wax and buff to protect the boat from the oxidizing effects of UV rays. (Waxing makes it easier to keep your boat clean, because dirt tends not to stick

### ALL THUMBS?

It doesn't mean you're a bad person. If you're not a DIYer (and you know who you are), then do your boat a favour and take it to the pros.

to it.) Wax on a warm day and make sure the hull has warmed up, too, but do it in the shade so the sun doesn't bake your telltale wax swirls into the finish before you can polish them off. Choose a wax designed for marine use. Some are combined with cleaners and a mild rubbing compound. It's best to do the buffing by hand, or use a low-speed electric buffer to avoid unsightly burn marks. It's also useful to be buff yourself for this job: Hand polishing isn't for wimps. Grant Jowitt says he can tell when someone's arm got tired by walking around the boat and noting where the finish changed. Some experts suggest waxing three times a season: spring, again in mid-season, and then before you put the boat away for the winter. "Most people complain, 'I don't wax my car that much,'" says Serra. "But gel fades faster than automotive finishes." So if you don't want to be back behind the wheel of the Barbie boat next season, wax on.

## While a touch of grunge may give your boat that lived-in feeling, there is a limit

### THE HARDWARE

Clean dirty hardware with an all-purpose cleaner or metal polish designed for stainless steel or aluminum, says Mason. Lubricate creaky hinges sparingly with a lithium or Teflon grease. (A word about WD-40: It will help free up a mechanism that's sticking, such as the spring on a seat hinge or the key in a lock, but is designed to displace moisture and will dissolve lubrication, so you need to follow up with grease.) To maintain the rubber around windows, which can crack and shrink over time, causing leaks, apply a silicone spray in the spring. Most marinas can replace deteriorating window surrounds. Tighten and seal loose cleats – if they won't tighten, the wood backing may have rotted out and will need to be replaced. Consider replacing screws with stainless-steel through-bolts and backing plates.

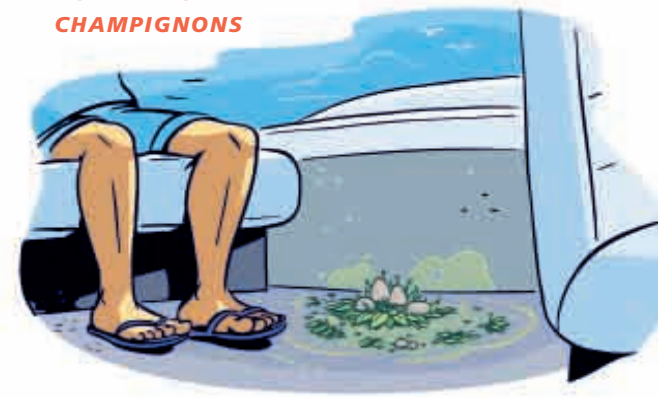
### THE SEATS

There's always duct tape in an emergency, but seats that are ripping at the seams, or have tears or holes, will likely need professional repair by a marine upholsterer who can match the vinyl. Ready for a complete makeover? If your boat is less than five years old, you may be able to order new seat skins from the manufacturer. By the way, seats that are never protected from the sun will become dry and split over time. And if they are left wet, the foam and the thread at the seams will eventually rot.

### THE CARPET

When you opened the top, did you discover that a green fuzz had crawled up your seat backs, or a giant puffball was rooted in the stern? Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to put your boat away

VOILÀ! LES  
CHAMPIGNONS



last fall when it was soaking wet. If your carpet is old and actually growing flora, all of our experts say you should rip it up. The bad news is that if your carpet is a goner, your floor, particularly around the seat bases, could be rotten too. In that case, you need to have it replaced – by a pro. Assuming your floor isn't rotted, and your carpet is salvageable, Shane Serra recommends the basics for cleaning: hot water and steam. Spot remover or soap may clean better initially, but could attract more dirt in the long run.

And for a fresh scent to cover up that *eau de worm guts*, add plain old lemon juice to the mix. Use a shop vac to remove the dirty water. In the market for a new carpet? Be sure it's marine grade with a rubber backing.

While a touch of grunge may give your boat that lived-in feeling, there is a limit. "Once," Brundle laughs, "I saw a blooming dandelion growing out of the back of a boat."

YOUR LAKE  
WILL LOVE YOU...

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### THE BILGE PUMP

Add water to the bilge and see if the pump gets rid of it. If not, then the pump is probably clogged with something floating in the bilge – such as pine needles, leaves, maybe an old rag that's fallen down – and needs to be cleaned out.

Finally, and this piece of advice can save you from a really bad day:

Remember to reinsert the hull drain plug. Don't laugh. Grant Jowitt says he sees about a dozen plug-related submersions a year. 🐼

*Kate Barker is a cottager, Toronto-based freelancer, and former managing editor of explore magazine. She still drives the same 1978 Edson bowrider she learned to pilot long before getting her driver's licence.*