

THE WEATHER WATCH
Understanding the Synopsis
June, 2006

As summer beckons, we begin to have visions of our forthcoming cruises to the Gulf Islands. For some, those idyllic days are made less so by the crossing of Georgia Strait, and the daily check on whether the infamous “small craft warning” will be in effect at either the beginning or the end of the holiday. However, a little extra work with your weather check can help you decide if the trip can be safely undertaken. Take the “warning” as advice to do some sleuthing.

Here again the key lies in a careful reading of the “Synopsis” in the forecast. If the expected winds are part of a developing frontal system (which often leads to increasingly strong southeasterly winds) or are part of a strong pressure pattern which has remained in place for a couple of days or more (often with consistent northwesterlies through both day and night), your best bet is not to venture out. With the fetches available in the Strait even a consistent 20 knot wind for 10-12 hours will create seas greater than two metres in height. A consistent 20 knot northwesterly for two days can take the result well over 2.5 metres.

Note that forecasts for Georgia Strait are for a very large area, with a forecast period of 24 hours. This means that not all parts of the Strait will be equally affected if the synopsis calls for a typical sunny summer day where the interior of the Province is expected to be hot, but the forecast winds include a small craft warning – especially for the afternoon. Often the strongest winds will be forecast northeast of Nanaimo, and along the east coast of the Island. In this case (and assuming that you are heading for or back from Porlier or Gabriola), check the actual winds at Saturna (East Point), Sandheads, Point Atkinson, Halibut Bank (including the wave height), and especially Entrance Island. Often very early in the morning will be quite doable for a crossing, before the heat-related daytime winds develop. An evening crossing also can work well. If you are in the Islands check the actuals at these stations during the two days prior to your return. See if the winds have risen during each day and the reported pressures have fallen, but the reverse has happened by late evening. This can give you confidence about your crossing time.

However, don't be suckered into a crossing where the real conditions are in fact changing – which is why the synopsis in the forecast is so important.

Remember, that winds in the Strait for our usual routes are not the only consideration. The state of the Fraser freshet and the state of the tide can be equally important. A heavy Spring flood plus Fraser flow against waves from even a 15 knot northwest wind can lead to a short sea and a rough ride. A morning outflow wind from Howe Sound can confuse things further.

Think these things through before the engines start! Salt spray over the bow leads to verdigris on the teeth bared by the grimaces of all on board.

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