

Caveat Radar

I wish to relate the following experience of a yachtsman which asks the question “Is the ship visible to you?”

For many years Cate and I have enjoyed our summer cruise from the Solent across to Brittany in *YoHoHo*, our Fairey Swordsman 33. Fog has been a problem crossing the Channel on about half the trips and sometimes we have been caught out in thick fog for at least part of the journey. I have therefore got into the habit of switching on the radar as soon as we leave port. I think this is one of my better habits as it ensures that the set is working and it familiarises me with the use of radar again when I may not have used it for eight months during the winter. We also see which type of boat shows up on the radar and many yachts do not.

We left St Peter Port at about 1000 and by the time that the south of Guernsey was abeam we were on course for the N W Minkies Buoy at our regular cruising speed of 20 kt. Visibility was excellent and we sighted dead ahead the Condor fast cat ferry on a reciprocal course. We estimated the range of the ferry to be something over 10 miles. At that time there was no target on our radar and altering the range of the set still showed a blank screen ahead. The speed of these ferries is over 40kt so we were closing at over 60kt and on the present courses would collide in under 10 minutes.

After a short time a tiny “blip” appeared on the radar at a range of 5 miles. By this time the ferry was clearly visible still dead ahead, coming straight at us and we could make out some detail on the vessel and see the white wash. Not wishing to have a close encounter we altered course 20 degrees to starboard and instantly a strong echo appeared on the radar.

This experience leads me to make the following observations:

1. We hear about “stealth” aircraft which are invisible to radar. The fast cat ferry when viewed from dead ahead is like a “stealth” ship and the radar return is not what you would expect from such a large vessel. The shape of the bows must scatter the radar signal and very little is returned to give an echo. Viewed from the beam the ferry gives an unmistakable echo.
2. If the conditions had been different with poor visibility we would not have known that a high speed craft was approaching until there was only 4 to 5 minutes from a collision.
3. The size of the echo would have led us to believe that it was a small vessel, probably a yacht and in fog we might not have altered course in time to avoid a collision.
4. *YoHoHo* is fitted with the big Echomax 230 radar reflector and the Sea-Me active transponder on both X and S band radars so at least the ferry officers should have spotted us easily on their radar.
5. In fog we slow down but these ferries keep going so without the Sea-Me transponder, in thick fog, both vessels would have continued happily to collide head on.

My conclusions from this experience are that an active radar transponder is well worth the cost for safety and peace of mind and you should keep well clear of known fast cat ferry routes in poor visibility.

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