

Topic 3: Navigational Rules when Following a Track or Route

NOAA charts include a “Recommended Route” in many areas of the ICW. On the paper version of the chart, it is shown as a solid magenta line and is often referred to as the “Magenta Line” when navigating the ICW. In other formats, it may be a thin solid black line. It became popular for many boaters to follow the magenta line when going south and situations arose where a boater going south would meet a boater going north with both following the same line. What is the proper way to pass each other when they appear aimed bow to bow?

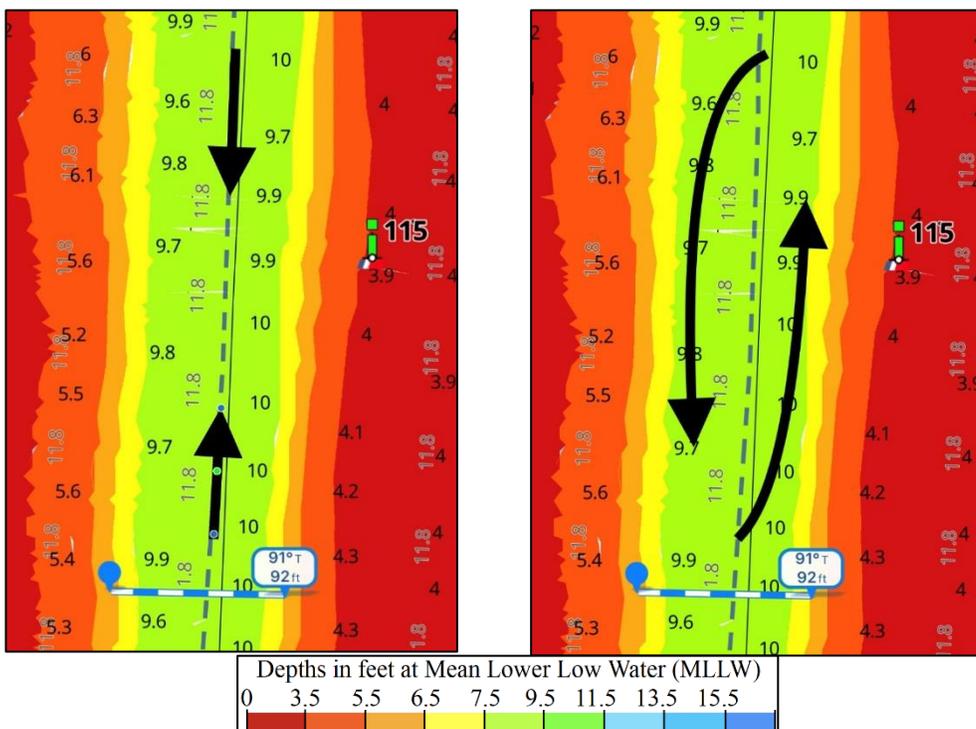
The first chart below is from the USACE survey as displayed in Aqua Map and illustrates a narrow section of the ICW at MM 45.4 just north of Coinjock, Virginia. In the picture, the thin solid line is the “Recommended Track” placed on the chart by NOAA. The blue dotted line is the Bob423 track for the same area. In this example, the two tracks are closely aligned. The two arrows represent boats on opposite courses. The [Coast Guard Navigation Rules](#) govern head-on passing situations in Rule 14 and Rule 9 for vessel operation in narrow channels like the ICW:

“Unless otherwise agreed, when two power-driven vessels are meeting on reciprocal or nearly reciprocal courses so as to involve risk of collision each shall alter her course to starboard so that each shall pass on the port side of the other”

“A vessel of less than 20 meters in length or a sailing vessel shall not impede the passage of a vessel that can safely navigate only within a narrow channel or fairway”.

“A vessel proceeding along the course of a narrow channel or fairway shall keep as near to the outer limit of the channel or fairway which lies on her starboard side as is safe and practicable”.

Important: both boats are to alter course to starboard as far as is safe and practicable, per the Coast Guard Navigation Rules, and pass each other port to port.



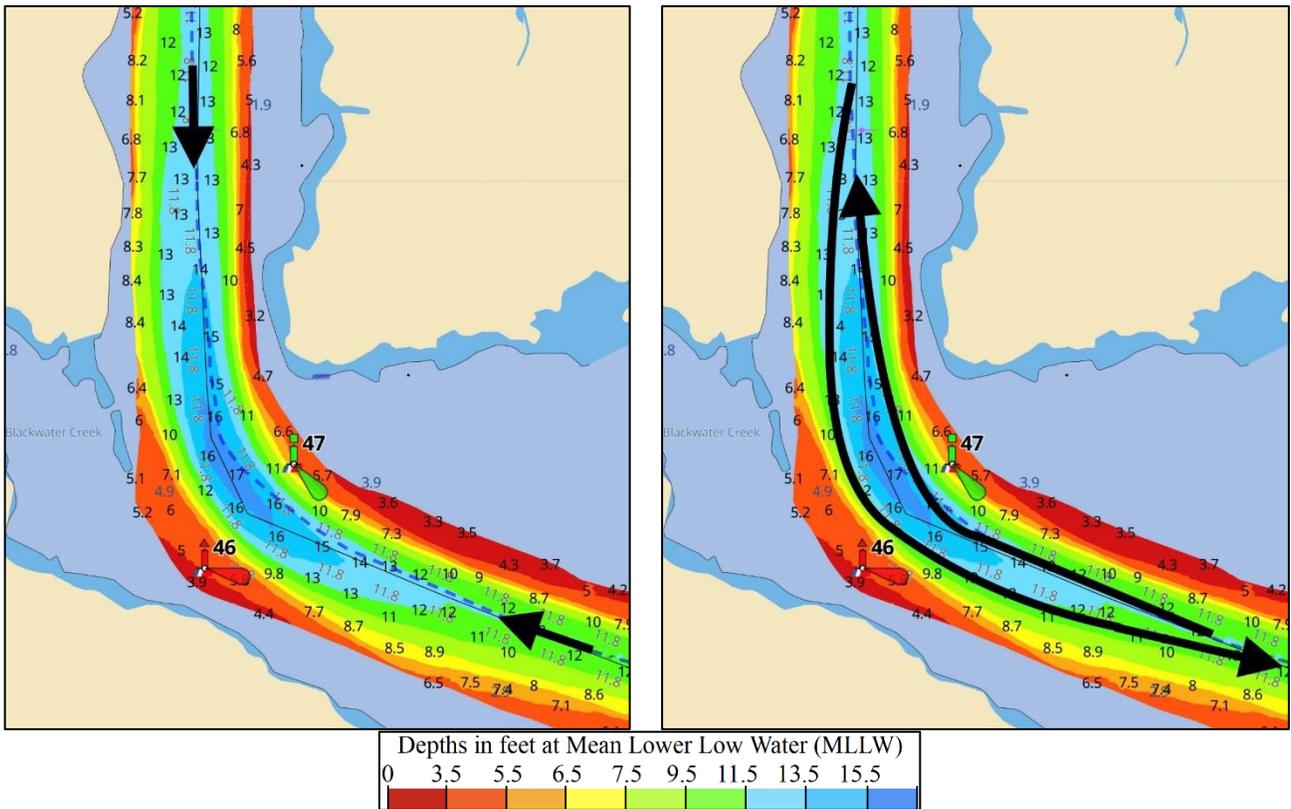
With the USACE survey displayed in Aqua Map, you can see how far it’s safe for you to alter course to starboard. For a depth of 7.5 MLLW, the relatively narrow channel here is still 92 feet wide. Even with a 20 ft beam for each boat, that allows a passing distance of 70 feet.

Even in the notoriously narrow section known as the “Rock Pile” at MM 351.5 at Myrtle Beach in South Carolina, there is still a 90-foot wide channel. It’s enough for two boats to pass safely.

Whether you’re following the Magenta Line, a Bob423 track, or any other track or route – follow the rules of the road for passing in head-on situations.

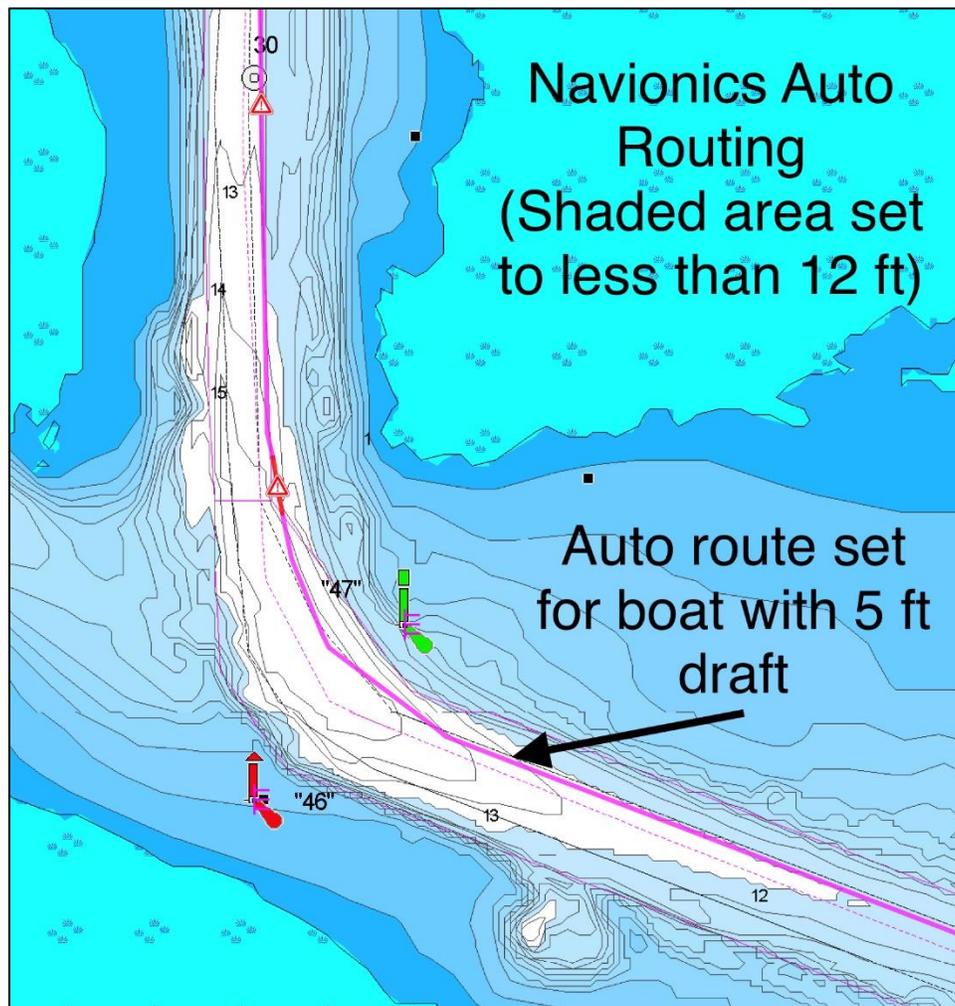
There are many turns in the ICW and sometimes you cannot see around a bend. How should you proceed then? The same rules apply but if you cannot see around a bend, then follow the narrow channel rule:

“...keep as near to the outer limit of the channel or fairway which lies on her starboard side as is safe and practicable”.



Let's look at an example taken from another area north of Coinjock, Virginia at MM 30.3.

If you cannot see around a bend, then you should anticipate that an on-coming boat may be in the middle of the channel or following the same track or route that you are following. You do not want to round a turn and find a boat bearing down without enough time to change course, you must anticipate. Move over to your starboard side ahead of the turn “as is safe and practicable” per the rules cited above. Once again, you can use the USACE survey as displayed in Aqua Map to know how far to move over and still have enough water, mainly, stay out of the red. Note that in the example above, both boats altered course to starboard and both boats moved off the Coast Guard Recommended Line (magenta line) or the Bob423 track.



Let's look at one more example, this time from the Navionics app, a popular navigation program that features auto-routing based on a boat's draft. The same turn on the ICW shown in the Aqua Map example is shown in Navionics SonarChart with the red line drawn by their auto-routing feature based on a boat with a 5 ft draft. You can see from the example that it hugs the inside of the turn which is not where you want to be heading south with an on-coming boat headed your way. In general, the Navionics auto-routing feature will plot a course that's enough for your draft but will hug the inside of all turns.

To restate: When approaching a blind turn, anticipate that a boat may be headed your way and move over to the starboard side of the channel.

There are many more rules of the road explained in the [Coast Guard Navigation Rules](#) which are available in PDF format in the link. Every boater should have a copy and study the contents. Boats over 40 feet in length are required by the Coast Guard to have a current copy on board. A [Quick Guide to the Rules of the Road](#) can be accessed in PDF format at the link for a quick review.

In summary, whether you're following NOAA's magenta line, a Bob423 track, or a route computed by Navionics, the same caution applies; learn and follow the Rules of the Road. You will then know what to do in any situation when interacting with other boats, a very valuable skill on the ICW.