

There's no greater thrill than "reaching" across a shimmering lake, say sailboat enthusiasts Steve and Linda Pravel.

Sailing: Getting close to nature

By LINDA PRAVEL

Until last summer, I never could understand how a sailboat returned to its original location once the wind blew it across the lake.

I still don't understand all the mechanics involved, but I do know whatever it is, it works.

Having always been sun and surf worshippers, my husband and I decided to expand our summer fun by purchasing a 15-ft Challenger-15 sailboat. We ordered the boat in July. The dealer let us stop in and watch as the boat was being built. We took delivery in early August and the dealer accompanied us to Union Lake where he showed us how to rig the boat. Then, with mast secure and sails at half-mast, we launched the boat on its -- and our -- maiden voyage. It was exciting to see how that mass of fiberglass we had seen earlier in the mold was now gleaming and bobbing on the water.

Then began our one hour lesson of how-to-sail. The woman's libber in me held my tongue as the instructor kept referring to my husband as the captain and me as the crew. (After all, it was originally MY idea to buy this boat!)

It took us almost one hour of no wind to bob half-way across the lake. We learned the basics of sailing. But then the wind totally died down and we started paddling back to the launching site. I couldn't help but think that the thrill I had expected just wasn't there.

Our second voyage was to Orchard Lake and an entirely different story. The thrill definitely was there. The wind had picked up and there were small white caps on the water. Maybe we weren't doing quite as well as I thought, though, because the Coast Guard came out to our boat to make

sure were equipped with life jackets.

We spent the end of summer and early fall sailing Wing Lake, Dunham Lake and Higgins Lake in all kinds of weather. Each day brought new experiences -- some more exciting than others. For instance, we decided to voyage across Higgins Lake one day, a distance of about four miles. A thunderstorm kicked up and we pulled into shore. Residents of a nearby cottage invited us in to dry off. After we thought the storm had passed, we ventured out again in nearly no wind. The storm returned. Fortunately, our cottage rescuer got into his motorboat and towed us back to the state park and safety. Later, I heard a tornado had touched down at Houghton Lake, just south of us. We know now to check out the weather more carefully before setting out for a cruise.

The only problem that remains is that my perfectionist husband, who has mastered the sailing jargon, insists on using all the technical terms.

I have to remind him from time to time that in an emergency situation not to use phrases like "hold the main-sheet" or "release the halyard." How can a person who has difficulty with left and right be expected to master "port" and "starboard" overnight. But I'm learning.

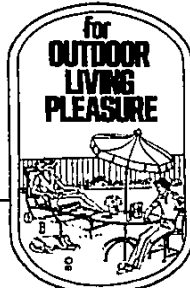
Since discovering sailing, I've become more in touch with nature. Nothing can beat the thrill of "reaching" across a quiet shimmering lake. As the breezy, sun-filled days are upon us, we are looking forward to another season of sailing fun.

And maybe this summer I'll "identify" with all those people in the sail magazines who wear those nifty yellow jackets and hats.

Linda Pravel is an Observer and Eccentric production department employee.

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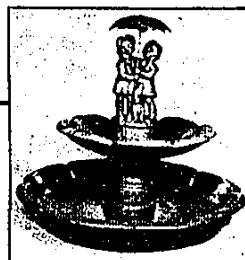
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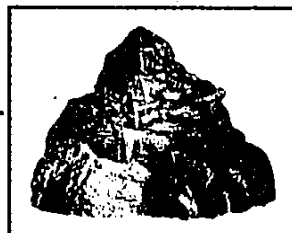
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