For the last three months I've been going over the boat getting it ready for the epic voyages planned for this summer. In the process I realized that I didn't really have what you might call a checklist for anything I was doing. Years of doing the same chores year after year had made me complacent, and now that I'm getting older (I use this as a comparative term only) I find that my steel-trap memory has rusty springs. Not a good thing when it could severely limit the scope of epic anything!

So where do you start? After giving it some thought I decided that the checklist should follow the priority of necessity. Given that reasoning, my sequence of checklists was; boat hull, spars and rigging, sails, engine, safety equipment and navigation equipment. Starting with the boat hull was obvious, if the boat doesn't float you don't have to worry about any of the rest of the items.

Boat Hull

The hull checklist would depend on the boat but should look like this:

a) Garboard drain plug installed

b) Hull caulking and seams in good shape (Your assessment here will be confirmed or condemned when the boat is launched, so if you are brave you can skip this check)

c) Sea cocks greased and closed

d) Double clamps on all connections below the waterline

e) Hose clamps not showing any rust

f) Propeller shaft stuffing box packing adjusted (When was the last time the packing was checked?)

g) Rudder post packing adjusted

h) Deck caulking in good condition especially over the berths!

I) Deck hardware bedded and well fastened

Spars and Rigging

The spars and rigging (with the sails of course) provide the motive force for the boat so they come next. The things to check should include:

a) Checks and splits in the spars should not have grown worse over the winter, if they have they may need structural repair.

b) Check for loose or missing fittings, you know the ones that were removed in the fall when you intended to refinish but never got around to it. Try looking in the recycled peanut butter jar on the back of the workbench, or the bottom of the tool bag. There are several options. Be creative!

c) How about those frayed lines you noticed last year, time to replace them?

d) And when was the last time you put on a heavy glove and inspected the wire standing rigging for excessive wear or broken strands in the form of "fish hooks"?

e) Check the blocks for free-running sheaves and excessive wear. It might be time for a little maintenance.

f) Are the turnbuckle threads clean and well lubricated? Do you have the correct cotter pins?

Sails

As for the sails the checks are fairly simple but time consuming if you inspect the stitching at all the seams, which really shouldn't be necessary. What may be needed is to look for signs of chafe in areas where lines rub across the stitching.

Engine

The engine checklist depends on your engine; gas and diesel will have different checks so we'll only cover the basics on this one. They are; air, fuel, exhaust, oil, coolant, and zincs.

a) All engines have some form of intake screen or filter. It has to be clean, and not restrict the airflow, especially for a diesel. Check it.

b) If you topped off the fuel tank last fall like you should have, you probably won't have any issues with the fuel. If you didn't there is a possibility you have moisture or algae in the tank. Make sure you have the appropriate clean fuel filters installed and have at least one set of spares aboard. Now, do you know how to change them?

c) Check the exhaust hoses for cracks or other deterioration.

d) Diesels have a bad habit of leaving serious carbon deposits in the exhaust elbow if run at low RPM for extended periods of time. This build-up causes a gradual loss of power over time since the engine can't expel exhaust gasses easily. When was the last time you checked it?

e) Change the oil. Even if you changed it last fall.

f) Unless you are using an extended life anti-freeze you need to change it. Anti-freeze contains several additives that provide coolant pump lubrication, acid reducers, rust inhibitors and other benefits to the engine that are depleted over time.

g) Most heat exchangers, both oil cooler and engine cooler, have pencil zincs in the primary (salt-water) side. If they have been reduced by more than half of their mass play it safe and replace them. Save yourself a potentially costly heat exchanger replacement or worse, engine replacement.

Safety Equipment

Now that we have checked the major items needed to keep the boat afloat and make it go we need to do so safely. The key to safety is preparation. All the things we've checked contribute to safety but there are several pieces of safety equipment needed to ensure you can handle an emergency. Your safety equipment checklist should include:

a) Class I or II life jackets for the number of people you plan on having aboard.

b) A working VHF radio and the know-how to broadcast a "MAYDAY"

c) Fire extinguishers capable of fighting class A (wood, cloth, etc.), B (fuels, oil), and C (electrical) fires.

d) A good bilge pump and perhaps a good bucket too. (Buckets rarely fail or clog. A scared person with a bucket can move a lot of water!).

e) An anchor.

Most folks don't view navigation equipment as "Safety" gear, but if you do find yourself in a bad situation, rescue will be a lot more effective if the responder knows where you are. GPS and Loran are good tools. They can give you a good position in a reasonably short time. Battery powered GPS should be part of your emergency kit.

See you safely on the water!