



# Winter Passage to Marsh Harbor

Squeezing through a hole in  
the weather window



By Bill Kund

**O**n a sailboat, things happen at 2 a.m. This particular 2 a.m.—on January 24, 2010—I'm almost thrown out of my bunk as the boat pitches and bucks. Listening to 50 knots of wind howling above me, I smile, thinking that just four hours ago, with the water as smooth as glass and not a breath of wind to be felt, I told my two crewmates: "I guess the weather experts really missed it this time." Now I'm lying here thankful we're still tied to the dock at Carolina Wind Marina in Washington, NC.

By 7 a.m., everything is calm again, but as we head to the showers

and make final preparations for our departure to the Bahamas, we see evidence of how ferocious last night's storm was. Just four slips from ours, a Catalina 34 broke off one of the pilings to which it had been tied. Luckily, damage to the boat was relatively light.

The weather experts—in whom I quickly regained confidence—were the folks from Commanders' Weather. Ken Campbell, the president, had been the keynote speaker at the Pacific Seacraft Sailing Symposium we hosted in November 2009, and I had contracted with him to do the weather routing for our offshore trip to Marsh Harbor.

As Ken told us at the symposium, January is not a particularly good time to head to the Bahamas. And with the active weather patterns we had experienced the past three months, it looked as if finding a four-day window to get us south would be a challenge. With Ken's advice, we had already delayed our departure by a week so we would leave the Beaufort, NC inlet at the tail end of one storm and reach Marsh Harbor before the next one got to us.

### PRIMED FOR ADVENTURE

Since it takes two days to get to the Beaufort Inlet from Washington, I planned to leave on the 24th to give us time to get there, refuel and get underway on the 26th without having to rush. *Worthless Wench*, my Pacific Seacraft 40, can easily handle the forecasted 30 to 35 knots of wind, especially in the Pamlico River. Fortunately, Ken convinced me there was more in store than had been predicted and I shouldn't be out in what I would be facing the night of the 24th.

Commanders' Weather routing services typically include daily email

updates during a voyage. Since I don't have a Pactor Modem for my SSB, my only means of receiving emails is through the satellite phone. I had let my service lapse because I was cruising the Chesapeake and Rhode Island last fall and didn't want to pay \$800 to restart it for the four-day passage to the Bahamas. The plan, therefore, was to work from a good initial forecast and get updated information from National Weather Service broadcasts on SSB along the way.

We departed Washington at 1220 January 25th, sailing on a beam reach under a 100% Yankee and a single-reefed main. My new Ullman Sails performed beautifully and we were seeing 7.2 to 8.3 knots over ground in 17 to 25 knots of wind—big grins all around. Since all three of us love to sail, we couldn't have asked for a better first day.

My crewmates included Chris Tulip from Richmond, VA, who has a racing background and a cast iron stomach. He crewed for me during an Ullman photo shoot in Deltaville last summer and helped bring the boat back from Newport to Annapolis in the fall. Jeff Smith, from Charlotte, NC and I sailed together when I helped bring his boat from the West Coast of Florida to its new home in Charleston, SC. I was confident in the crew and the three of us were primed for adventure.

### NORTH ATLANTIC RENDEZVOUS

Early on January 26th, armed with the routing information emailed to us by Commanders' Weather that morning, we sailed down the ICW for our rendezvous with the North Atlantic. At 1537, after topping off the fuel tank, having lunch ashore and changing into cold weather gear, we headed for the Beaufort Channel and dove into the maelstrom. We were greeted by 12- to 14-foot



This page: Chris Tulip (left) and Jeff Smith, casting lines as they wait for wind. Opposite, *Worthless Wench* at anchor in Marsh Harbor

confused seas and a biting cold wind that was strong enough to power us through the slop from the back of the passing storm. We had one reef in the main and were sailing under the 100% Yankee.

Both Jeff and I were feeling the effects of the rough seas, but Chris did a commendable job driving us past the Cape Lookout Shoals on a broad reach into the night and into the Gulf Stream, barely restraining himself from shouting “Yeehaw!” each time he coaxed *Worthless Wench* onto the proper heading after a strong wind gust—a living example of Bill Crealock’s philosophy that “the passage itself should be one of the pleasures of the cruise.”

Ken’s routing put us into an eastward meander of the Gulf Stream. This would both propel us to the other side of the stream more quickly and mitigate the northerly component of the veering wind, which would be crossing the Gulf Stream at right angles rather than head-on.

By the time I took the 0200 watch on Wednesday, we were a little overpowered. I put a second reef in the main and roller-reefed the

headsail to keep the boat on her feet. I never cease to be amazed at how well this boat handles rough seas. She always feels secure. At 0500, the wind moved aft and diminished enough that we had to drop the sails and secure the boom so we could motor through the remaining chop to stay on our prescribed course.

For me, one of the pleasures of the passage is sailing—using the wind rather than fossil fuels. I’m always amazed at how many people on sailboats don’t take the trouble to sail anymore.

“The wind’s too strong,” they say, or “the wind’s not strong enough.” “The wind’s blowing from the wrong direction.” Heaven help us if we actually have to tack. The prospect of motoring the next day and a half, as dictated by the weather outlook, clearly was not at the top of my list of enjoyable activities.

### SHIP, SHIPMATES, SELF

From Commanders’ Weather: “Saturday will be a rough day in Marsh Harbor. A cold front will be moving SE across the Florida Peninsula with some big thunderstorms. S-SW winds in Marsh Harbor will be 20-30+ kts daytime Saturday. You really need to reach Marsh Harbor on Friday night and no later.” Ken Campbell had suspended the Sword of Damocles directly over Man O War Channel.

While I’m passionate about sailing, the one unforgivable sin on any vessel, in my opinion, is irresponsible seamanship. Ken’s warning strongly dictated that we needed to get the boat and its crew out of a potentially dangerous situation. After the demonstration of his forecasting skills the previous Sunday, I tended to believe him. Remembering the

mantra “Ship, Shipmates, Self,” the prudent course of action became obvious—move the ship and crew out of harm’s way by all means at our disposal. In this case, that meant turning the ignition key.

With less wind than had been predicted for Wednesday and a windless day ahead of us Thursday, we resigned ourselves to a couple of days under power. Because of our tight timeline, we kicked in another 200 RPM to keep boat speed up, furled the jib, put away the main, secured the boom and settled back for a motorboat ride. Jeff and I, who had both been living on stugeron, were ready for some real food. Grinning, Chris told us he had managed to eat his way through a whole package of salami and provolone. No sympathy there.

Thursday, we caught up on boat chores, put out fishing lines and relaxed. We were making good time toward our destination, the horizon was empty, the seas were flat and the autopilot was steering the boat. Jeff and I traded songs on the guitar. The ever-present drone of the engine faded into the background and we got some much-needed rest. Knowing we were hitting Ken’s suggested marks and that the forecast called for wind the next morning gave me the opportunity to relax except for one nagging thought: we were not going to make it to Marsh Harbor before dark on Friday.

### MOTHER NATURE’S SHOW

Although Man O War Channel is one of the wider cuts in the Bahamas, it’s not wise to go through any Bahamian channels in the dark if it can be avoided. Most are not marked. We decided to proceed as planned and—if conditions were reasonable—lay off outside the channel until first light. If conditions

looked like they might deteriorate during the night, we would consider traversing the channel using the chartplotter if the weather and seas were benign enough to do so safely. I had been through the channel two years ago and knew the chartplotter gave an accurate reading in this area.

Friday, this decision was taken from me. The predicted wind didn't materialize. The seas were like glass. We were facing more time under power and I was concerned that we were consuming too much fuel. Checking the fuel levels confirmed this. Time for a crew meeting. We decided to slow down to conserve fuel until we got the current National Weather Service broadcast later that morning to confirm what the storm, predicted for Saturday, had in store for us.

Good news! The storm had moved further north than predicted. We would have fresh winds on the nose coming into Marsh Harbor Saturday morning, but nothing dangerous. Engine off—we were waiting for wind! As we let ourselves drift, a large pod of dolphin cavorted around the boat for half an hour. A short while later, we saw a pod of five whales—the first I had ever seen in the wild—a couple hundred yards off our starboard beam. Mother nature was putting on a great show.

Suddenly, our fishing line started running. There was a lot of pressure, but as our catch was reeled in, it looked like a big bunch of Sargasso weed had fouled the hook. In fact, it turned out to be a very angry little puffer fish. We hauled him up, unsuccessfully tried to get him to smile for some photos, and cut the line, leaving him with a pierced lip sporting a #2 Clark Spoon. Imagine the conversation when he got home: “You get home late from school and what happens? You swim in here looking like a human!”

Around noon, we started seeing ripples on the water. Spinnaker time. We set the cruising chute, letting it tend itself in the light and variable winds and saw a slight increase in boat speed. We were a sailboat again, moving at between 2 and 3 knots in the right direction. By 1700, we were getting a steady 6 to 8 knots of wind and enlisted Chris to show us his spinnaker trimming techniques. I took over the helm, and as we began working together, the wind filled in and our speed increased. Within an hour we were seeing winds of 10 to 15 knots and boat speeds of 7 knots. The smiles came back and Jeff went below to make a celebratory dinner.

By 1900, it was getting dark and winds were building to 15 to 20 knots. We doused the chute, cleared the decks, and set the mainsail and Yankee. Boat speed was between 7 and 8 knots. By 2315, we put a single reef in the main and started making long tacks toward Man O War Channel. The seas—mainly wind chop—were building as the wind, according to prediction, veered onto our nose.

### LAND HO!

Saturday 0700, working our way toward Man O War Channel, we spotted land. It's great steering at something other than waypoint blips. As we got closer, we radioed Patty Toller at Barometer Bob to ask about the conditions in Man O War Channel. We got a chuckle about our boat name and an all-clear for the channel.

Around noon, we finally got through the channel into the calmer, turquoise waters of the Sea of Abaco and, after all the practice the last 12 hours, performed a series of near-perfect tacks hoping to impress our fellow cruisers. Unfortunately, we played to an empty house; the rest of the cruising population was holed up in Marsh Harbor, hiding from the wind.

We anchored, launched the dinghy, and motored to The Moorings Marina to make arrangements for our customs and immigration clearance. The Moorings ([www.moorings.com](http://www.moorings.com)) offered to let us tie up at their docks and the office staff made several phone calls on our behalf to expedite the process of getting the appropriate government officials to check us in. Several days later I met with Samantha Cornish, the base manager, and complimented her on her first-rate customer service staff.

Although we were still officially under quarantine, we were allowed to move around Marsh Harbor, and once we had secured the boat at The Moorings dock, we had our official “We made it!” dinner at Curly Tails. Great boat, great crew, great sailing—we're already talking about our next trip. ~

*Bill sails Worthless Wench as far and often as his schedule allows. A former professional bicycle racer who competed for the U.S. in the 1964 Olympic Games, Bill has been sailing for 10 years. He is a commercial photographer based in Washington, NC or on his boat—wherever assignments take him.*

