

It's time to get "SIRIUS" about satellite weather

BY LENNY RUDOW

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU WANTED TO PUNCH THE WEATHERMAN IN THE NOSE? HOW MUCH WOULD YOU PAY TO HAVE A WEATHERMAN ON YOUR BOAT WITH 100 PERCENT ACCURATE, REAL-TIME FORECASTS AVAILABLE ALL THE TIME?

If you're an angler who fishes the bay and/or ocean from a boat, chances are you've wanted to throw a lot of punches and would pay a lot of dollars to know what's really going to happen on the water on any given day.

New advances in marine electronics have made it possible for Sirius Marine Weather to interface with several major chartplotter manufacturers to provide real-time, on-screen forecasts. By adding a receiver and an antenna to a compatible chartplotter and paying applicable subscription/activation fees (www.sirius.com/marineweather), you can leave the traditional weatherman in your wake.

One of the first runs I scheduled on this boat was a spring trip to chum for stripers. As many will remember, it was a very stormy spring, and the night before the trip the weatherman called for a 40-percent chance of thunderstorms in the morning. At zero-dark-early, five of us met at the ramp. I launched the boat, fired up the HDS7 and activated the weather overlay.

We sipped our coffee and listened to NOAA's predictions as we waited for the data to come up on the chartplotter. According to the weatherman, there was still just a 40-percent chance of storms. But after a moment, the Sirius Marine Weather screen came alive, and we saw a thick line of thunderstorms 40 miles to the west and rolling toward us at 20 miles per hour.

The Doppler radar view (shown on Image 1) indicated rain and lightning as green blobs and red circles with thunderbolts through them. The information was updated at five-minute intervals by signals from Sirius weather satellites. Direction of travel is shown with a small arrow, and when the cursor is placed over the weather system, a pop-up box shows the speed of the storm's movement as well.

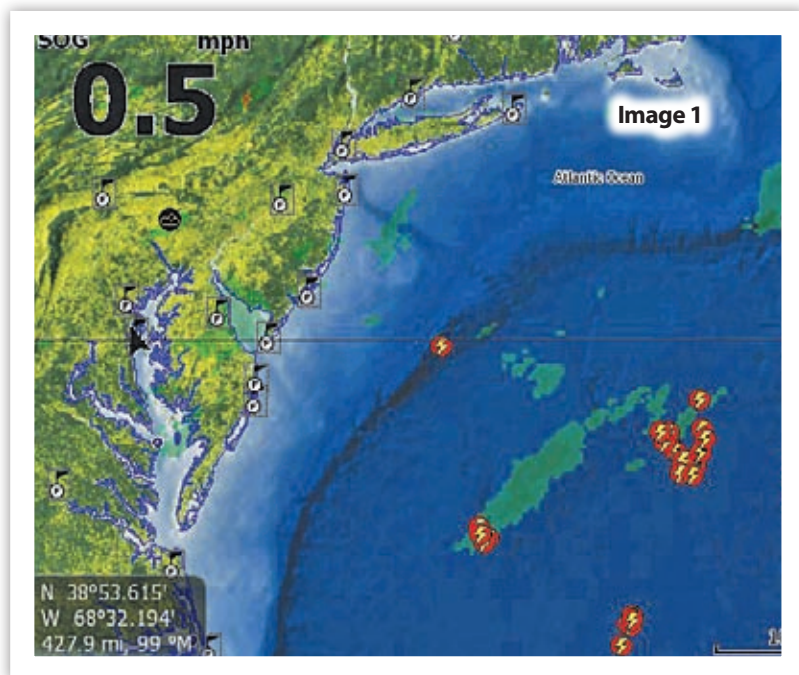
Now, remember, this was the first time I had seen anything like this prior to a trip. After 30 years of being misinformed on a regular basis by "professional" meteorologists, I simply didn't believe what I saw.

How could it be any better than what NOAA had just said? How could I be sure the information was correct?

"Let's give it a shot, guys," I said. "It's clear overhead right now, and who knows if those storms are for real?"

Well, those were famous last words. It took about an hour to get to our fishing spot and drop the anchor. As soon as I cleated off the line, I stood up, turned around and caught a flash of lightning out of the corner of my eye. Damn!

According to the Sirius Marine Weather screen, the storms were now an hour out and headed directly at us. There was another flash of lightning, and then another. Double damn! I pulled the anchor, and we ran for the ramp.



LEARNING THE HARD WAY

This spring, I purchased and rigged a 1997 22-foot Glacier Bay. The electronics package I chose was a Lowrance HDS7. Many factors went into the decision-making process when I got the Lowrance, but a major one was the ability to interface the unit with the Sirius Marine Weather module and get real-time weather updates on-screen.

COMPATIBLE UNITS FOR SIRIUS WEATHER

Sirius Marine Weather is available on the following marine electronics: Lowrance HDS, Raymarine A, C, E, and Series, Furuno Navnet 3D and VX2, Northstar 6100i and 8000i, Simrad GB40.

XM weather is available on these units: Garmin GPSMAP 378,478, 640 and in select models in the 500, 4000 and 5000 series.

Almost an hour later, as we pulled up to the boat ramp, the skies opened up and lightning began to crash all around us -- right on time, according to what the Sirius Marine Weather had showed two hours earlier.

FLASH FORWARD

We're 25 miles off the Atlantic Coast of Maryland three months later, running for Baltimore Canyon through calm seas. We can see a dark line on the horizon.

I overlay the Sirius information over the chartplotter and it shows storms from the 50-fathom line out to well beyond the canyons. This time, I have faith in the unit and what it's telling me. I pull back the throttles and opt to troll closer to shore for a while and give the storms time to clear out. They don't, and we remain inshore all day.

As we pull the boat that afternoon, a center console full of soaking-wet guys arrives at the ramp. "Wow," one says to me, "I've never been so glad to get off the boat."

We got our butts whipped by some nasty storms in the Baltimore today. It didn't calm down until we came back inside the 50 line." I'm thinking: "Yeah buddy, I know. Believe it or not, my weatherman told me."

By now I've learned to trust the information Sirius Marine Weather gives me, and I consider it one of the most valuable electronic functions on my boat. Of course I still keep an eye on NOAA's predictions prior to

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my trips, to get an idea of what's coming. But these days I'd sooner give the weatherman an uppercut to the honker than pay any attention to him when I'm prepping to launch. So, you know I like it lots. Here's what it does and what it costs:

DOLLARS AND SENSE

Sirius Marine Weather data, which is available on many new chartplotters such as the Lowrance HDS line-up, includes more than lightning and rain data. Wind bars indicate wind direction, wave height data can be overlaid on-screen, and even SST information can be brought up, either numerically or by color. You can also set weather alarms with watch boxes, so the unit starts beeping when lightning or storms enter the selected area. Getting Sirius consists of adding a receiver unit and an antenna to your chartplotter and subscribing to the service. Lowrance, Furuno, Northstar, Simrad and Raymarine currently make compatible units. In the case of Lowrance, the antenna is similar to a GPS antenna and the receiver is the size of a deck of cards. Unfortunately, it's also made of plastic and doesn't seal very well, so make sure you mount it in a well-protected location. Wiring is plug-and-play, although I did need to do a software upgrade via an internet download to an SD card to get the system up to 100 percent.

Account activation requires a \$25 fee, then a monthly subscription depending on what service you choose, as follows: The Inland (\$13) package includes basic weather, excluding SST and wind. The Mariner package (\$30) and the Voyager (\$60) include all of the mentioned functions plus weather forecasting. In the case of the Mariner it's for 0 – 3 hours, and for the Voyager, 0 – 72 hours for weather maps and isobars, and 0 – 48 hours for wind and wave forecasts. All of these packages also include some land-lubber perks, like sports scores and retail roadside fuel pricing data. Plus, if your chartplotter has the function menus (the Lowrance HDS system has it, but presently most others don't), you can also receive Sirius music, news, and sports channels. All you have to add is an amp and speakers. Six-month seasonal packages are also available for those who stop fishing during the winter months.

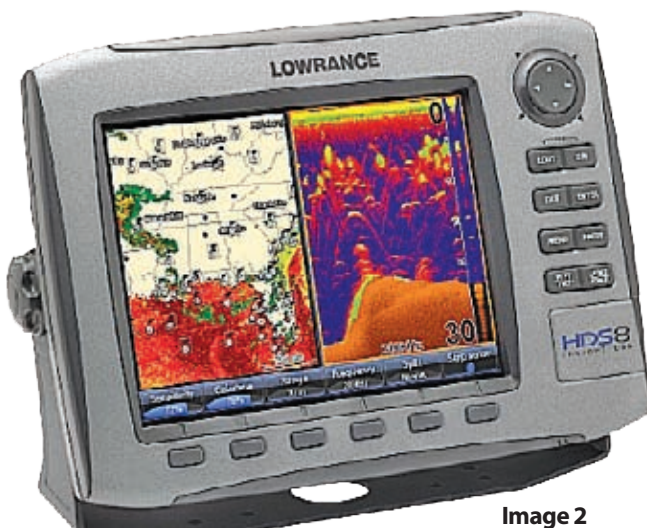
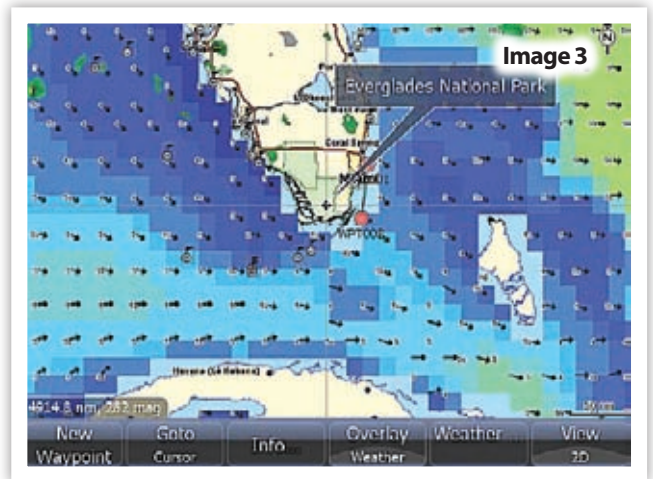
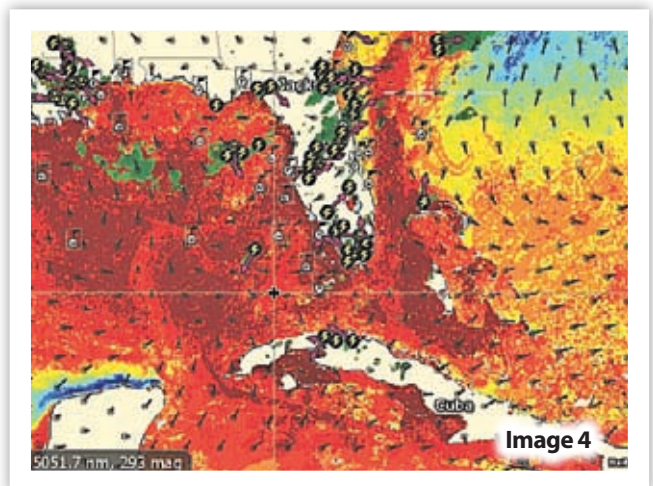


Image 2



If you don't want all the additional functions, you can also opt for the Charter package (\$30) which includes all weather data without the extras. You can find more details on the system and different subscription options at www.sirius.com/marineweather.

Bring up all this stuff at once, split your screen between plotter and fishfinder, add in the other chartplotter data like soundings and markers, and your screen gets pretty darn cluttered up. Fortunately, it's easy to toggle on and toggle off different functions, so you can swap SST for wave height and vice-versa with a few button-presses. Look at Image 2, for an example. On the left you see colored SST data and weather data clearly, while the right half the screen is dedicated to the fishfinder. Image 3 shows how you can focus on wind and wave data. Note that color matches wave height (dark blue is smallest here, light blue is slightly larger and green is larger still) and it jibes with wind speeds. The barbs show direction, and the dark green blobs indicate rainfall.



As mentioned earlier, putting up all this data at the same time can make things a bit confusing. But in this case, a large screen that's dedicated purely to chartplotter mode, as opposed to splitting with a fishfinder, is usable with a huge amount of data being displayed. SST colors, wind barbs, and precipitation data including both rain and lightning are visible. Note that you won't be able to bring up tinted SST and tinted wave data at the same time. 🇺🇸