



Photo by Mark Provost

The jetties at Florence are one of the many locations along the Oregon Coast that offer surfers a place to brave cold water and air temperatures during the winter months.

Serious surfers face cold waves

By Stephen Maher
Emerald Associate Editor

The surf along the Oregon Coast gets a little nasty during the winter. Driven by wind and current, it tosses around logs and debris and anything else within its grasp. Danger is ever present and only under certain conditions do people venture out upon its surface.

Surfers are among those select few. Possessing both a desire for freedom and oneness with the ocean, they paddle out from beaches and come into contact with 10- to 20-foot waves and 44 to 48 degree water.

"It gets into an advanced realm of surfing during the winter time," admits Greg Edwards, a Eugene surfer and the owner of Boardsports, a local surfboard and skateboard shop.

According to Edwards, the best surfing during the winter occurs before and after a storm.

"During the storm everything gets so sloppy that it doesn't have what we call good definition," says Edwards, adding a few hard-core surfers nonetheless do surf through storms.

Because of the adverse conditions found during the winter months, the number of

surfers decreases slightly during that time, says surfer Mike Olsen, the owner of the Oregon Surf Shop in Lincoln City.

"There are some people who only surf in the summer when the sun is out. . . But the hard core surfers, the men and women who are into surfing as a lifestyle or a recreational sport, do it all year long," he says.

Surfing in the summer is more of a sociable affair when compared to winter, Edwards says.

"During the winter time, it's more like your buddies out there are the seals and the fish," he says. "It's just more wilderness. It's more like Trapper Dan surfs the channel."

"During the winter time some of the better places are hidden coves; places where the big waves can beat on the outside and then come in," Edwards says.

In Florence, people surf either the inside or the outside of the local jetties, depending on the direction and size of the waves, Olsen says.

But Edwards cautions that winter tides are tricky in and around the jetties. "If you're not an experienced surfer, and don't have someone to show you the ropes, you can get hurt."

There is also the threat of Great White shark attacks, but Olsen says the chance of that occurring is "possible but not probable."

Olsen believes there is always the inherent danger of a shark attacking, but surfers who "think about sharks while they're out in the water . . . aren't going to have any fun. So why even think about them? Why even go out?"

Olsen believes shark attacks occur because sharks mistake surfers for seals and sea lions, which is a main staple of the sharks' diet off the Oregon Coast.

Since 1976 there have been five reported shark attacks along the coast. Most have occurred during the fall months when seals and sea lions are feeding on salmon running up coastal rivers.

For those surfers who battle the dangerous conditions of winter, a certain level of exhilaration awaits as their reward.

"The ocean is so big that when you get out there it's just one on one; it's just you and the wave," Olsen says.

"There are no other influences that decide how well you do," he says. "It's just your own ability against the ocean waves. It's just a great feeling of freedom."

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