

On New Year's Day, a cold splash of camaraderie

Polar Bears greet the new year fearlessly, if wet

By ANDREW R. TONRY
For EO Media Group

Carousing after New Year's kisses I tried to find someone to join me. But I didn't get so much as a nibble. No one wanted to think of the rapidly approaching morning, much less greet it by plunging into the ice-cold ocean.

Of all those I asked, none had ever jumped in alongside the Arch Cape Polar Bear Club. But a few had heard of it. Their guffaws came, dripping with no shortage of sarcasm.

"You're gonna get naked with a few old men, eh?"

"What a way to kick off 2016."

I all but gave up. With a few friends I wandered out of the Warren House and down to the beach in hopes of seeing the northern lights, which were supposedly visible. Besides the stars, though, the only lights found were attached to crab boats.

After reigniting an abandoned bonfire then huddling around it for a temporary respite from whipping winds, we made our ways home. As we parted, I offered one last salvo.

"Polar Bear Club in the morning?"

No takers.

Beautiful, but jaggedly crisp

The buzz of a blaring alarm clock is never a pleasant sound, particularly after partying. This goes exponential for Jan. 1.

At least the sun was out, illuminating my bedroom, the white sheets almost aglow. The air outside them was jaggedly crisp. Aching and reluctant, I arose. I splashed handfuls of hot water onto my face and jammed a toothbrush into my mouth. I grabbed two towels then piled multiple layers over my Speedos — long johns, sweat-pants, a T-shirt, two sweaters, a wool coat, beanie and wool socks. I wrapped the towels around my neck like a scarf, pulled on my boots and stepped outside.

It was beautiful. I squinted at the glowing, clear blue skies, bright green grass and rays of golden sun. It was also cold. Really frigid. The bunnies scattered as I sauntered to my car, my breath visible, even after closing the door. I turned the key and KMUN chimed over the stereo.

On the roads there were few signs of life besides a few pattering chimneys. As I pulled onto U.S. Highway 101 I noticed a pool of water in the middle of the highway. It was frozen over. A mile or two south I passed a lone cyclist. He too was starting his year with some healthy determination. I began to cackle. His devotion seemed to pale. I was fixing to jump in the ocean.

By the time the car had warmed it was time to get back out. I reached Arch Cape, but my directions were a little loose. A "second house on the right" kind of thing. But I wasn't sure where, exactly, so I just tramped through some foliage, over the crooked boulders of the sea wall and down to the sand.

No real sign of any Polar Bears, though. I posted up, facing south, away from the wind. It really was gorgeous. As gorgeous as it was cold.



Andrew Tonry/For EO Media Group
Members of the Arch Cape Polar Bear Club head for the surf on New Year's Day.

I could see the crab boats so well I began to wonder: were they closer than normal, or was this day just that clear?

His name was Rip

I saw a man with a big, black, wool navy coat with close-cropped gray hair and short. He strolled out, ankle deep into the water and plunked something down into it. He raised it up and looked. Taking a measurement, perhaps? He returned to a fledgling bonfire and I approached.

"Are you a Polar Bear?" I wondered.

"Mhmm."

His name was Rip. In his orbit were two boys about middle-school age. They were tending to the family fire, stirred back to life from last night's celebration.

Rip had indeed been taking the water temperature. It was in the neighborhood of 40 degrees, which was likely warmer than the air. Such knowledge offered scant consolation.

When the wind blew hard its force was staggering. And while sustained gusts strong enough to create little trails of sailing sand are not uncommon, rarely did it get whipped to face level, where it now approached.

Rather suddenly, boys, girls, men and women, grandpas and grandmas of all ages began streaming over the rocks and onto the beach. They were in all manner of dress — covered in bathrobes, hoodies, wrapped in towels, and in nothing more than their skivvies. Old men in parkas to teenage girls in bikinis.

"They want to be in and out quickly as possible," Rip said of the hastily assembling ranks.

In a beanie, a fleece jacket, and with a towel wrapped around his waist I recognized Court Carrier from the Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce. I asked him if he knew who here had been a Polar Bear the longest. He pointed me back towards Rip.

The group had grown to maybe 75 or more. They began lining up down the

sand, facing the water, hand-in-hand as they jumped and wiggled to stay warm. The line grew in each direction. I peeled off my layers and ran out to join them. Just as I did the hands broke and legs began pounding towards the surf.

Mobile within ice

All were jolted as their toes breached the water. Some hesitated. Others barreled on. I was deterred to rip off the plunge like a Band-Aid, in one fell swoop. Ahead of me a gaggle of teenage boys dove into the shallow waves. No point in waiting, I figured. It was time. As the next swell approached I launched myself through it like a plate glass window. Submerged for those brief fractions of a second, I felt mobile within ice, somehow still liquid. I vaulted upright and blasted out of the water like a rocket — bellowing, twisting and shouting in a celebratory convulsion of life and physical shock.

Gone immediately were any remnants of the night before. The plodding drag of feeling half-asleep vanished. I was 110 percent, lean, mean, freezing machine. Indeed, that blink under water was more potent, more explosive than all the cups of coffee in all the world. I was not only awake, but very much alive.

So too did the plunge invigorate numerous biological red alerts — *Dire systems warning. We cannot sustain this.* Uncontrollably, my breath shortened and quickened. I shivered with the first pangs of hypothermia.

Walking from the water, the wind reared up. It stopped me in my tracks. Jesus. My body, dripping wet, felt as if icicles were forming in real time on my chest, a slick, icy crust overtaking my skin. I tightened, but also in a good way — leaner, and in much greater physical harmony than only moments prior.

Wide-eyed, pushing forward, the Polar Bears streamed alongside me, back to their towels, to the fire. A woman wearing a tinsel crown looked over and howled as we walked: "Why do we do this?"

Her question was rhetorical and there were a few added expletives, and it was said only partly in jest. My answer was the same: "Why not?"

New and profound camaraderie

I found my towel and buried my head in it, vigorously rubbing. It was glorious, whisking away those freezing beads and pools. I gave my chest and arms a few cursory wipes before pulling on my upper layers, jacket and all, dragging them over still-wet skin. I wrapped the towel around my waist and tried to take a few pictures. My shoeless feet throbbed. My toes — or what I could still feel of them — screamed in agony.

Weaving about I noticed a new and profound camaraderie. Where everyone emerged from their cabins stoic, they were now giggling and talking and holding hands, giving kisses, being absolutely present with one another. The shock of the water jumpstarted not only our bodies, but a community.

Wood began piling on the fire. An old rocking chair. Stray logs. Driftwood.

Then came a Christmas tree. It went up in an instant, some 10-foot high. Everyone stepped back, then once, maybe twice again. The radiating

flames were both ferocious and delightful.

Rip was circulating, spreading the word: hot buttered rum party at his cabin in one hour. Folks spilled back off the beach, into the surrounding homes. Rip invited me in.

A hot buttered rum party

We walked up the path, past last evidence of last night's revelry, to the cabin. It's been in the family since the 1950s. The wooden sides were angled like the letter "A," low, tight and aged. Coals crackled in the stone fireplace. In the kitchen a floor-to-ceiling wall of tacked-up photos and Polaroids chronicled generations. Most everyone in the room — near 10 family and friends — had wet hair.

I was handed a steaming cup of rich, black coffee. Rip had one, too. Hot buttered rum was being readied, stirred on the stove.

Rip and I sat down at the kitchen table and he told me about the Polar Bears. Two subsequent generations joined us — Rip's nephew, and some teenage boys. The youngsters tuned in, wide-eyed and ears open. They even had questions — and tales — of their own.

The family had been at it since the '60s, Rip said. He himself has missed maybe four plunges in the last four-plus decades. He now lives in San Francisco, but makes a point of making the trip. Rip said his mom recently retired from the club. She just turned 90. It was her first year not diving in.

Rip said his mom was one of the originals, along with a woman named Barbara Shaw, who had just passed. Barbara was known as the queen. In her honor, Barb Beemer was bestowed the ceremonial honor. Turns out we crossed paths earlier. She was the one wearing the tinsel crown.

As the hot drinks warmed our lips, hands, mouths and bellies, we talked about tradition, family, community and the beach. We talked about what keeps an event like this going, and what makes it special.

Rip said that part of the allure was the cleansing, the washing away of 2015. But we agreed, it's more than that: it's meeting the new year and clearing a hurdle — doing something that's hard, or something that scares you, or just throwing caution into the wind. In a way, it's about being foolhardy, or maybe just determined — seeing a wall and putting your shoulder down and plowing right through it. It's an exercise of abandon and will. And once you've done it, plunged of one's own volition into that ice cold Pacific, you emerge feeling anything is possible — like, "OK, what's next?"

Toasty warm

I remembered what I'd told my friends the night before, trying to convince them to come: "When have you ever jumped in the ocean and regretted it?"

As I returned home to Cannon Beach, a newly minted Polar Bear, I roused my friends for brunch. Their heads were still cloudy, and they shivered as they left the house.

All day I stayed toasty warm.

Swimmers enjoy New Year's Day with a dip into the Pacific Ocean.

Andrew Tonry
For EO Media Group



9-1-WHAT?

THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

Santa, no!

Christmas in Warrenton. The colorful lights, the glistening frost, the elderly man riding a red scooter who hit someone's dog with a stick ... Hold on, really?

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT.

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{12/25 @ 3:46 p.m.} An elderly man riding a red scooter hit the caller's dog with a stick. #Warrenton

RETWEETS 2 LIKES 1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{12/26 @ 6:15 p.m.} What sounded like a single gunshot from an apartment was a dropped bowling ball. #Astoria

1 LIKE 0

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{12/28 @ 10:59 a.m.} Vehicle was hit with eggs thrown from a bus stop. #Warrenton

8:57 AM - 29 Dec 2015

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{12/27 @ 2:52 p.m.} Caller reported a neighbor calling her names. #Seaside

9:20 AM - 28 Dec 2015

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{12/28 @ 8:36 p.m.} Man laying halfway in the road, not moving. He was intoxicated and napping. #Astoria

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9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

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