

COASTAL LIFE

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DRIVE ON —

LITERALLY

LEARN ALL ABOUT CLATSOP COUNTY'S
DRIVABLE STRETCHES OF BEACH

By MARILYN GILBAUGH

Morning, noon or night, a 10-mile stretch of Clatsop County beach — from Gearhart north — can be accessed by passenger cars and trucks or what our lawmakers label “motorized vehicles.” Whether it’s a summertime day trip, an early morning clam tide or a glorious sunset in a secluded spot, with a car and a legally drivable stretch of beach, the good times roll in.

In Clatsop County, driving is permitted on the beach from Gearhart’s 10th Street beach access north for about 10 miles to the Peter Iredale Road exit at Fort Stevens State Park. It’s open all year, 24/7. From mid-September through April, another four miles up to the jetty at the south side of the Columbia River is open to drivers all day, too.

Thanks to the 1967 Beach Bill, the public has free use of Oregon beaches, which are designated as a state recreation area. The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department regulates vehicle use on the beach through its ocean shore rules, and the state agency has established zones where cars are restricted or prohibited, taking into account concerns for safety, public access, scenic and recreation values, conservation and beach management.

Specific day-use permits to drive in restricted areas can be applied for at Oregon Parks and Recreation offices. In Warrenton, drivers can apply for the permits at Fort Stevens State Park and at the Oregon State Police office at 2320 S.E. Dolphin Ave., south of Costco. In Cannon Beach, drivers can apply for permits

at the Cannon Beach Police Department (though, you don’t need one in June during Cannon Beach’s annual Sandcastle Contest; it’s the only day of the year when driving and parking on the beach in Cannon Beach is allowed).

Permits must be applied for in advance of a function for one-time daytime-only use, such as a wedding or getting your handicapped great aunt to a family reunion photo location. Some permits may require a certificate of insurance. Information as to where and when you can drive is available online; there’s even an official Oregon state map too at www.oregon.gov/ODOT

“The main problem with people driving on the beach is that, often, they don’t know how to,” said Jason Gardner who spends many summer weekends driving the beach in his bright yellow Jeep Wrangler, often lending a helping tow to a car in distress.

“You never know what you’ll find on the beach,” said Astoria resident and frequent clammer Shelby Mogenson.

Such was the case early one morning when Mogenson and her husband, Gary, were digging for razor clams at Sunset Beach. “I hear my Gary calling my name. I look in his direction and — whoa! — there’s a car in the water. A man had driven his car straight into the surf,” Mogenson recalled. “Honestly, my first disoriented thought was that the car had somehow popped up out of the ocean; one moment it wasn’t there, and then it was. There’s a guy alone in the car, and he can’t get his door



PHOTO BY HUGH MCKENNA

This motorist driving south on the beach near the Sunset Beach approach in August 2013 hit deep water, which turned his vehicle perpendicular to the ocean. Rescuers from Warrenton Fire Department, Oregon State Police and Clatsop County Sheriff’s Office responded to the scene. No one was injured, and Classic Towing pulled the car from the water and towed it off the beach.

open because the water is halfway up to his window. Gary throws his clamming stuff up on the beach and runs out to get the car door open. He gets the guy out of the car.”

Luckily, a police officer patrolling the beach for clam limits drove by. He called in for additional help.

“When we left, an ambulance and fire truck were on their way,” Mogenson said. “We don’t know what happened or why, but there was no sign of the car when we checked the next day. Hopefully the man was fine and his car was towed.”

So, what are guidelines you can follow so you don’t end up like that guy?

Stay out of the ocean! Salt water and the undercarriage of a car don’t get along. Even rinsing with fresh water can bring on rust. And, time and time again, seasoned beach drivers agree, four-wheel drive is by far the best choice for beach driving. Rear-wheel drive is OK, but a front-wheel drive car? Park and walk.

Next tip: Deflate all four tires somewhere around 10 pounds. Tire pressure varies and can be found in your car owner’s manual or on a sticker on a car’s door. Decreasing the pressure allows the car to “float” on the sand more easily. Don’t forget to reinflate for pavement driving. There’s lot’s of information regarding deflating tires available on the web.

If you get stuck in the sand, don’t spin your tires. Continuing to hit the gas and spin just digs the car in further. It doesn’t matter whether you’re trying to go forward or backward; the real trouble starts as you dig into the soft sand. Whether you’re coming on or exiting off the beach, keep a low speed and keep moving forward — don’t stop. You never want to stop in dry sand. Choose the path most used by other cars; it’s usually the most packed down and easiest to drive.

“Carrying a small shovel is always a good idea when driving on

the beach, particularly in soft sand,” said Oregon State Police Sgt. Tim Schwartz. “Where you enter and exit is important too. Gearhart, Del Rey Beach Road and Sunset Beach are usually good. Fort Stevens can be iffy due to high use.”

The speed limit is 25 mph on the beach. Turn your car lights on, and pay attention to pedestrians — kids and dogs are on the beach to play and that usually means running around. All rules that apply on Oregon’s highways apply to the beach; pedestrians have the right of way. Overnight camping is not allowed, but beach fires are allowed west of the dunes and any vegetation.

The beach is patrolled and traffic tickets are steep particularly for driving in restricted areas. All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) are not permitted. Remember, it’s always more difficult to drive onto and off the beach than it is to drive on it. Know what you’re doing, observe the rules and enjoy the ride!