



Stars on the rise (hopefully)

Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Erick Owen, Melissa Keyser and Bonnie Neugebauer look for sea stars that have been decimated in recent years by a mysterious disease.

By COLIN MURPHEY
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CANNON BEACH — At first glance, the people in red jackets combing the tidal pools around the base of Haystack Rock might look like they were about to break a cardinal rule of this area: don't touch the wildlife.

But when one gets closer and sees the logo on the back of the red jackets, it all makes sense. The volunteers with "Haystack Rock Awareness Program" emblazoned across their backs are there to protect and preserve the wildlife.

And although several local species are struggling, one in particular really needs help. Sea stars, or starfish, have been in

decline in recent years due to a mysterious disease that causes them to lose arms and oftentimes die off completely.

The volunteers have been counting sea stars and noting whether the creatures are afflicted with the disease to see if they are in decline or on the rise once again. Melissa Keyser with the Haystack Rock Awareness Program said keeping track of how the sea stars are doing is an excellent barometer for measuring the overall health of the entire ocean.

"Sea stars are the original keystone species," Keyser said. "It is a species that is indicative of the overall health of the environment. So, if they are not doing well, what does that mean for the overall environment?"



A sea star clings to rocks at the base of Haystack Rock in Cannon Beach.



Merrick Habecker, left, and his mother, Lisa, brave the cold and surf to count sea stars at Haystack Rock.



ABOVE: Erick Owen searches for sea stars with the Haystack Rock Awareness Program to survey the animals and their health. BELOW: Lisa Habecker uses a flashlight to locate sea stars during the survey.



Merrick Habecker, right, keeps notes while his mother, Lisa Habecker, calls out when she finds a sea star.



Lisa Habecker with the Haystack Rock Awareness Program in Cannon Beach searches for sea stars at the base of the iconic landmark.