



Weird Plastics

This one is a bit of a downer. Once you start looking for plastic on Oregon beaches, you start seeing it everywhere. Plastic is bad news for the ocean, the beach and all the creatures that make their homes there. However, artists have found ways to turn plastic pulled off beaches into some truly astounding art, or even jewelry — all to raise awareness about the impact of plastic pollution. Several dedicated groups organize yearly cleanups along Clatsop County beaches, using specially constructed sieves to filter out micro plastics.



Dead Sea Lions

Not everyone's choice, but dark things happen out there in the natural world and this will be probably the closest you can safely get to these large marine mammals. But keep pets away. In 2018, Oregon biologists noted several cases of leptospirosis, a disease caused by bacteria, in Oregon's sea lions. People and dogs can catch the disease, though dogs are far more likely to be exposed. Good news, pet owners: You can vaccinate for leptospirosis. Bad news for everyone: Dead sea lion is a super-distinct, particularly terrible smell.

Weird Jellyfish

Besides the usual milky white Moon Jelly or the stinging, yellow-brown Pacific Sea Nettle, there's the tiny Comb Jelly. Its globe-like body is usually less than an inch big and seems to hold a spark of sunlight inside. It can't sting and looks like a strange, delicate bead of water on the sand.

Then there is the by-the-wind-sailor or Velella velella, a floating colony with a clear triangular sail above that catches the wind. These guys wash up in huge numbers throughout the year and, once beached, bleach in the sun. One year, they were so numerous on the ocean waves at Fort Stevens State Park that people kept calling the Coast Guard to report capsize boats, mistaking the undulating masses of floating by-the-wind-sailors for oil slicks.



Pyrosomes

These strange colonies look like bumpy translucent hollow tubes made out of jello and are more common in warmer waters. During recent years, however, there was an invasion on the North Coast. Thousands — millions — of the creatures washed up for months on beaches in Clatsop County and floated in such densities offshore that they gummed up commercial fishing gear. They ranged in size from the length of a pinky to that of a palm or even bigger. Sightings trailed off in 2018 but researchers are still studying them to figure out why they showed up in such abundance and what impact they might have had on the food chain.



Sand Fleas

First, they're not fleas and they don't bite, though it can be a little gross when whole flocks of them (herds?) are jumping in the sand around your feet. The tiny crustaceans are called amphipods, the most common of which, in Clatsop County, is the Pale Beach Hopper — adorable, right? You'll see them just about any time you're walking on the sand. They are smaller than a fingernail and highly mobile. They are also the housekeepers of the beach and eat all the marine debris that washes up daily at high tide. Without them, the beach would be a much stinkier place. 🌊

Photos from top:

Pyrosomes dot the sand near Cannon Beach.

A tiny jellyfish, about the size of a marble, perches on the sand of a Clatsop County beach.

Velella velella wash ashore during a bout of strong westerly winds in 2015. Each velella is actually a colony of hydroid polyps.

Bluish-purple velellas inundate beaches. The smell of their decomposition becomes very pungent very quickly.