

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE STORM

Tips for safe weather watching on the North Coast

BY REBECCA LEXA

While the coast may be best known as a summer vacation destination, the storms that roll in from the Pacific Ocean in fall and winter also bring in their fair share of sightseers.

Few things are as thrilling as watching the gusts of wind whip up the waves into whitecaps, and hearing them crash against the shoreline. While many choose to watch the show from the comfort of home, hotel or other cozy indoor locale, others gear up for a up close and personal look.

Unfortunately, many people, especially visitors, don't understand the danger that these storms pose.

The agitated ocean can produce sneaker waves larger and more frequent than on quiet, calm days — waves which have dragged too many people into the cold water. Even away from shore, storm winds can bring down heavy branches and toss entire trees across roads and trails. And while lightning isn't present with every storm, the risk of lightning strike is still greater than zero.

So how can you enjoy these magnificent forces of nature without having the experience ruined by an emergency? Here are some tips to stay safe:

- Dress for the weather. Wear plenty of warm layers, with a waterproof outer shell and sturdy waterproof footwear. Avoid cotton as it loses its insulating properties when wet; synthetics are a better choice. Wool will keep you warm even if it gets wet. Don't forget to keep your head and hands warm, too!
- Keep a respectful distance from the waterline. Sneaker waves made larger by storm winds can travel all the way up the beach to the dunes, treeline or other boundary. The closer you are to the ocean, the farther you may have to run to escape the incoming water, which can sometimes travel faster than some people are able to move on soft sand. Even 6 inches of water can be enough to knock a grown adult off their feet.
- Look out for driftwood, and remember that waves were what put these massive dead trees on the beach. Don't stand on or near driftwood, as waves can knock you off — and under — the heavy weight. The water may also be carrying more driftwood in from the ocean, and you may not see it heading your way until it's too late.

- On the off chance you're a thrill-seeking surfer looking to tackle big waves, please be aware that the coastline on either side of the Columbia has a lot of rip currents even on the nicest days. These dangerous currents can pull people far out to sea, and make conditions in the water even more risky.

- Keep your dogs leashed at all times while on the beach, even if they have good recall. Your dog can quickly run further than you can easily call them back, and they can be dragged into the water by sneaker waves. If your dog gets pulled into the water do not go in after them; there have been many instances where a person tried to rescue their dog, and both ended up drowning.

- In the event someone ends up in the water and cannot get back onshore by themselves, call 911 immediately. Do your best to keep them in sight. Remember the saying "Reach or throw, don't go!" If available, you can throw a rope, flotation device or other object to the endangered person, but do not try to bring them in yourself as it is likely you will also end up trapped and unable to swim back to shore. Moreover, if the person is panicking and you are able to reach them they may try to climb onto you and push you under the water's surface.

- If you hear thunder, take shelter! You are often the highest point on your immediate expanse of beach, which makes you more vulnerable. Go inside, or get back in your car. If you are stuck outside, get away from the water and avoid trees and cliffs. As a last resort crouch down (but don't sit!) with your head tucked against your knees and your arms folded over your head.

- Even if you have an entirely safe storm watching session on the beach, be careful when you're driving back home or to your lodging, especially if it's dark. High winds can knock a branch or tree into the road — and even onto your car — with little to no warning. Visibility is likely to be compromised by rain at any time of day or night, which increases the possibility of collisions with other vehicles, pedestrians and wildlife. Slow down, make sure your lights are on and be extra vigilant to look for obstacles.

By following these tips, you're much more likely to have a safe experience where the most exciting thing is getting to watch the waves crash and the storm clouds rumble in.

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Mallory Gruben

A boat launch for Tillamook Bay just east of Cape Meares Beach became inundated with water during the king tide event on Nov. 7.

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"You can take photos of the regular high tides all year long any time, and then on the Flickr site you can see what the difference is between a regular high tide and then a king tide," said Jones. "That's pretty cool to see, and it's a really good educational tool for people to see how their communities are inundated by these king tides, which will be reaching further inward every year, according to science."

Each person who submits photos is eligible to win a prize; prizes will be distributed in February. The project will select winners in five categories including: coastal flooding, coastal erosion, waves, comparison and people's choice.

'It is possible to take photos from a safe place'

Jones stressed the importance of citizen photographers staying off the beach and aware of their surroundings while taking photos of king tides.

"Stay safe. Take photos from a safe distance. That's part of every single message we put out," Jones said. "I wouldn't want to be part of encouraging any kind of dangerous citizen science activity. It is possible to take photos from a safe place."

To safely capture photos of the king tides, CoastWatch recommends citizen scientists study the tide chart before selecting a spot to watch the tides. They also suggest scouting for spots off the beach and behind fencing before the day of the king tides, to properly visu-



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

Waves crash over the South Jetty at Fort Stevens State Park as people take to the observation tower to watch a storm.

alize the water levels and identify a safe location off the beach to stand. Photographers can shoot from safe distances using a telephoto or zoom lens, so you can get close-up photos from a distance. CoastWatch and Oregon Coast Management work to make people aware of when the king tides will occur, and keep people off beaches. The project can also help educate Oregonians about general beach safety, such as watching for unexpectedly large "sneaker" waves or checking a tide table before heading out for the day.

"It's incredible how many people don't even know about the tides," Jones said. "This is an opportunity to educate the public about tides in general."