

Waves can be hazardous for some, (dangerous) fun for others

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When the National Weather Service issues beach hazard warnings, as it did this week, alerting beachcombers to “northwesterly swells resulting in increasing surf heights,” the interest of another subculture is peaked.

According to Tom Tyrrel, co-owner of Local Boys Surf & Skate Shop along with his wife, Shirin, regional surfers consider the smaller waves breaking onto the summertime shores of Crescent City beaches to be ideal. But come the end of September, a whole new season rolls in for surfers in the know.

“Everyone knows along the West Coast, from Mendocino to Washington, that now through next summer is a good time to get wet and catch a good swell,” Tyrrel said.

But while a beach hazard warning promises surfing waves as high as 20 feet, that doesn’t mean conditions are ideal. Especially since the weather service warnings are given when there are high risks of “sneaker waves” - larger, dangerous ones that can suddenly appear in a chain of more innocuous waves.

That's why Tyrrel said surfers seek secondary forecast information, such as found on the website www.magicseaweed.com. The site offers a detailed look at conditions at South Beach, just southeast of the harbor, describing South Beach as the main break of Del Norte County:

"A wide, flat, expansive beachbreak near the Crescent City Harbor right alongside Highway 101. The north end of the beach is the most sheltered and blows offshore during north winds, so it's a good place to go during springtime and between winter storm fronts. Getting out can be a problem. Best during high tide on southwest swells."

Scroll down and the website has a detailed 16-day forecast. However, Tyrrel said, the chart showing swell ratings can be deceiving. "A beginner could look at it saying the surf is going to be 7-10 feet and say, 'Dude, far out!' Then get out there and the wind will be totally wrong," Tyrrel said.

"It can actually be extremely difficult conditions and look like garbage out there."

He said that if he knows conditions are less than ideal, especially like they were on Wednesday during the National Weather Service's beach hazard warning, he won't take the \$40 rental from beginners only to see them need rescuing later by the U.S. Coast Guard.

One of his customers, who asked to remain anonymous, said, "You know what we call people who go out on days like this? Kooks."

Tyrrel said that this time of year, he'll see locals and surfers "up from the valley" every day, especially on weekends, hitting the waves.

He added that the key to spotting ideal conditions on www.magicseaweed.com is to focus on the columns the primary and secondary swells. The two swells' directional arrows need to be going in the same direction, so they're not contradictory and canceling out the waves.

And, he said, finding the right time to surf takes practice. "South Beach might be fine, but Pebble Beach could be blown out."

Plus, there are the secret spots only the locals know to catch the best waves. Just don't ask them for the locations. "They're like fishermen with their favorite fishing holes. Surfers won't tell you their favorite spots, either," Tyrrel said.

For beginner or veteran, he said, it's best to heed those surf warnings. "The ocean can take your life if you don't respect it."