

They're alive after sneaker wave hits

January 17, 2020



Vicki Mizel and Doctor Siggy are lucky to be alive.

Mizel was “swallowed up and tossed around” by a sneaker wave that hit the beach just before noon Jan. 11 north of Gold Beach.

That same day, similar waves resulted in the deaths of two children near Cannon Beach.

Mizel and her cat, Doctor Siggy, who walks along with her on a leash, had taken advantage of a break in the weather to enjoy the sun and stroll the beach. They were walking on a stretch near the parking area at the north end of Nesika Road, where it dead ends.

“It’s a beach we’ve been going to for five years,” she said. “I didn’t know anything about king tides and sneaker waves.”

Predicted for that day at Wedderburn was a 7.9-foot high tide at 11:22 a.m., according to the website saltwatertides.com.

King tides are both extraordinarily high and low ones that occur once or twice a year, usually when Earth is closest to the sun, often in January.

Sneaker waves occur more frequently and unexpectedly, suddenly running up on the beach beyond where previous waves were reaching. They occur as waves amplify each other when they combine, instead of canceling each other out.

Those waves can knock people down, fill their clothing and shoes with sand and water, and drag them out to sea because they can't get up.

"When the wave hit, the undertow and swift current began pulling me out," said Mizel. "I wasn't prepared. Thank goodness I had my cat on a leash and in my arms.

"I kept thinking, 'Tuck and roll, breathe, tuck and roll.' As the current was moving, I went back to my training. I had excellent training and learned that technique years ago.

"I was screaming, and a young man named Talon Salonen, who was walking his dog on the beach, heard me."

"My girlfriend and I were just hanging out at the beach and we saw this other person," Salonen said. "We were walking up the steps from the beach when a huge wave came up to the step right behind us.

"I handed my dog's leash to my girlfriend and ran back down to the beach when I heard screaming, and I saw this poor lady who was up to her neck in water."

"He asked, 'Do you need help?' right after a large log tumbled to the left of us," Mizel said.

Just as the wave was receding, pulling Mizel and her cat along, Salonen gave Mizel his hand and pulled her up.

"I was a little worried about the cat," Salonen said. "He was hanging on for dear life."

"I was amazed the cat stayed calm and wasn't freaked out or panicked," Mizel said. "Literally, the hand of God helped me."

Salonen kept hold of Mizel's hand as he walked the 65-year-old woman and her 17-year-old cat to higher ground.

Salonen is 21 years old and lives in Nesika Beach, where he works as a temporary caregiver for a disabled man.

He looked for Mizel's lost shoes after the rescue, and when he couldn't find them borrowed a pair from his mother for Mizel to wear.

Meantime, Siggy the cat avoided being given a bath after his traumatic experience, making do with being towel dried.

Mizel still has a swollen, stiff neck from the day's exertion, but otherwise she and Siggy are staying warm and snug.

Mizel since has learned that Curry County Emergency Management posts local information for high-surf and weather events from the U.S. National Weather Service on its Facebook page.

A notice on that page, dated Jan. 7, warned, "A high surf event is possible Saturday morning to Sunday morning. Right now, it looks like High Surf Warning conditions will be met (vs. High Surf Advisory), and very large breakers of 30-35 feet are possible."

According to the National Weather Service, "For much of the West Coast, sneaker waves kill more people than all other weather hazards combined." Its website warns that waves can surge more than 150 feet up the beach. "Never turn your back on the ocean."

For more information about sneaker waves and beach safety, visit <https://www.weather.gov/safety/beachhazards> and select the Sneaker Waves link on the right.