

Ship Report Transcript

Thursday, May 9, 2024

By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. It's Thursday, May 9th, 2024.

Well, today I'd like to start out with a look at the weather. But this time, the land based forecast instead of the marine weather forecast, because the weather's about to get really nice. And with that, there are a few things that I'd hope you would keep in mind. But first, the weather.

It's going to be gorgeous here at the coast for the next few days. Sunny highs in the high seventies and low eighties in Astoria. Heaven on earth. This is the time of year when where we live really feels like paradise and we love it.

So today I thought I'd talk with you about something that happens every year around this time on the coast and on our rivers. And it presents a considerable risk for people who are near the water because like this weekend will be the air will be hot and the water will seem really enticing as a way to cool off.

Every spring we have a few days where it seems like summer is here. The air temperature climbs up into the high seventies and even the eighties. And the weather is great and we are giddy. And lots of people head to the water, whether that be the ocean or a river near you. And they want to go in the water because it's hot. So here are some important things I want you to remember.

And the first is, If you remember all the things that people like me or the Coast Guard or the National Weather Service warn you about all year long here that the water is cold and the currents are strong and the rip currents can be hard to see and all of that.

Well, all of that is still happening right now and will be happening all summer. It's just that now the air is warm and it feels like summer with a capital S. Maybe summer you experienced somewhere else where the ocean warms up in the summer, like on the East Coast where I grew up and I used to swim in the ocean all the time. Or Southern California or Hawaii... that is not here.

So let me remind you loud and clear: this is the Pacific Northwest, which is not any of those places.

People who know what they're doing here, prepare for going in the water. If you notice, the people who do go in the water here safely, they are people like surfers or U.S. Coast Guard personnel. Those folks wear wetsuits for two reasons. Those wetsuits keep them warm and they give them buoyancy, both of which can allow you to stay in the water safely for a while and which can buy you time in an emergency. And an emergency can happen just like that in the blink of an eye.

And while falling into the water here can be a really bad idea in the winter and something you would not intentionally do, it's really not that different now on a sunny day here than on that winter day. The only difference is the air is suddenly warmer.

All the other conditions with regard to the water are the same as they always were. But let's start with the moment you end up in the water. You fall in the water or you get pulled off your feet in the surf by a rip current. All of a sudden, in that moment, the situation you are in has drastically changed.

When your body hits the water and you are engulfed by it. Are suddenly in over your head. In our cold water here, you are very likely to experience an involuntary response called the gasp reflex. You're going to gasp when you fall in, and this can cause you to inhale water. And that's the point where a lot of people just begin to drown. Now you're in the cold water and your body won't get any of the benefit of that warm air above you.

Here's some information about cold water shock from the National Weather Service. When your body hits cold water, cold shock can cause dramatic changes in breathing heart rate and blood pressure. The sudden gasp and rapid breathing alone creates a greater risk of drowning. Even for confident swimmers in calm waters, unplanned immersion in cold water can be life threatening for anyone without protection from the temperatures or a lifejacket to help you stay afloat or something like a wetsuit.

Some reminders about cold water. You can lose your body heat four times faster in cold water than in cold air. Wearing a life jacket significantly increases your chance of survival. And cold shock can be just as severe and dangerous from water temperatures of 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit like we have here as it is from water at 35 degrees Fahrenheit, and gasping for breath from sudden immersion can be triggered by water as warm as 77 degrees Fahrenheit.

Being prepared for an outing on cold water means being prepared for the possibility of suddenly being immersed in cold water. That's why people on boats around here wear life jackets all the time or they certainly should.

So the situation for you could quickly become dire if you end up in the water unexpectedly and can't get yourself out. And I could tell you to wear a lifejacket at the beach, as I mentioned earlier, but most people won't do that.

So I'll tell you this: Don't put yourself in the position of falling in or getting swept off your feet in the surf - and water up to your knees with a rip current happening can knock you down and carry you away.

A little perspective here. I was trying to figure a reference point for this for the cold water and how it feels. Right now, the water temperature in the ocean near the mouth of the Columbia River is about 54 degrees Fahrenheit in the Columbia River off Astoria near Tongue Point. It's about 52 degrees.

I ran the cold tap water in my kitchen sink and measured the temperature. It was about 62 degrees. I think you'd probably hesitate to get into a cold bath or shower in that water. And I would have had to put ice in that water to get it as cold as our water here is right now.

Then I thought of a place where I've gone wading in the past a lot in an inland river. And that's the Colorado River in Arizona. I used to go wading in the eddies there on hot summer days when I lived at least ferry the water. There was around 50 degrees. And when I stood in it, it made the bones in my legs ache.

So we humans are really not designed to be immersed in cold water. We really have a pretty narrow range of temperatures that we can handle as humans. So it's going to be gorgeous this weekend and

you'd be crazy not to go out and enjoy it. And lots of people do have a wonderful time here and enjoy our beautiful area. And you should too. But just don't push your luck with our cold water situation in a place that is already known for cold temperatures, strong tidal currents and rip currents. So just know where you are and act accordingly.

Every year we lose people on the beach here who just seem to ignore what living here really means when it comes to the water. Please don't be one of those folks. Go out there and enjoy yourself. But we want you to be with us here next week, and all summer long and beyond.

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