

## EMERALD ISLE WATER SAFETY FAQ'S

### 1. How do I know what beach conditions are for Emerald Isle?

First you should know that Emerald Isle is **ALWAYS** at a **minimum level** of yellow flags. Emerald Isle **NEVER** flies green flags because we believe that there are always inherent dangers when entering the ocean and you should always use caution. If you want to check to see what current conditions are, go here: <https://www.emeraldisle-nc.org/rip-currents-and-surf-forecast>.

### 2. What do the flags mean?

- **GREEN** flags indicate that conditions are safe. The Town of Emerald Isle does not fly green flags, as we believe that there are always inherent dangers when swimming in the ocean, therefore it is never completely safe and you should always use caution.
- **YELLOW** flags indicate moderate hazards, and that the public should use caution in the ocean. In Emerald Isle, even the calmest of days on the beach can pose an inherent risk when entering the ocean and the public is always advised to use caution.
- **RED** flags indicate that there is a high risk of strong currents or other hazards and the public is advised to stay out of the water.
- **DOUBLE RED** flags indicate that there is an extremely high risk of strong currents or other hazards and the Town Manager has enacted a prohibition on swimming for our beaches under the authority granted by Town Ordinance Chapter 5 Section 5-25. You can be fined or arrested if you go in the water.
- **PURPLE** flags indicate an abundance of potentially hazardous marine life in the vicinity, including Portuguese man-o-war, jellyfish, and other creatures. The town will fly these flags as needed in specific locations, however, the use of PURPLE FLAGS is relatively rare.

### 3. What if I don't see a flag where I am on the beach?

Flags are only posted on the beach strand from Memorial Day to Labor Day (during the time when we have lifeguards). If you don't see a flag from where you are on the beach, you should know that the Town of Emerald Isle is NEVER under green flag conditions. So, if you don't see a flag where you are on the beach then you should check with the Emerald Isle Fire Department or the town website <https://www.emeraldisle-nc.org/rip-currents-and-surf-forecast> to determine our current beach conditions.

### 4. Why doesn't the town post flags along the beach all the time and year around?

The only time you will see flags posted along the beach are during the months we have lifeguards patrolling the beach (Memorial Day to Labor Day), and then only when we are under red flag or double red flag conditions.

### 5. Why is the town reporting conditions that are different from what the National Weather Service is reporting?

NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) gathers information for their reports from weather buoys positioned 30 miles off the coast of North Carolina. Emerald Isle town staff evaluate our beach conditions daily and communicate this data to NOAA to get the best forecast information possible to provide the public. Most of the time, the conditions we are reporting in Emerald Isle are consistent with the forecast advisories posted by NOAA for all the beaches in our area. However, there are times when the conditions we are experiencing in Emerald Isle may be more severe than what is being reported by NOAA equipment or being experienced by other beaches in our area. In that situation, our flag conditions may be different from the NOAA forecast or even the flags flown in Atlantic Beach. Please know when that happens, it is because we are reporting the most accurate information possible for Emerald Isle to ensure the safety of our residents and visitors.

**6. Can't you get the rental companies to put information in their rental packets for people warning them about the dangers?**

The town works very closely with all of the major rental companies to get information out to visitors and guests to promote safety in the Town. The rental companies are very proactive in supplying safety information produced by the Town for their guests by putting them in their rental packets, as well as, posting information in all of their rental units. This information explains the flags system, rip current information, beach rules and regulations and even has information about nesting sea turtles.

**7. Why doesn't the town position Jet Ski's on the beach strand?**

Town staff are constantly working to improve and perfect our response to all concerns in the town. Over many years of testing different approaches, we have found that the quickest response in these situations is achieved by traveling over the roadways to the closest access rather than trying to work our way through hundreds or thousands of people along a crowded beach. Our goal is to get there as quickly as possible to have the greatest chances of conducting a successful rescue.

**8. Why doesn't the town buy speed boats to put along the coastline to perform rescues?**

The surf conditions, geographical conditions and even weather conditions have molded our rescue practices over the years and we believe that we are currently using the most effective methods for our conditions along our shoreline. Waves and surf conditions along our shoreline make using a boat a dangerous option for rescue situations.

**9. What steps is the town taking to educate people on the dangers posed by ocean conditions?**

Each department in the town works very hard to get information out to our residents and guests and educate them on the dangers and hazards present in the ocean.

- Town staff host educational programs on beach safety, rip current dangers, and other hazards multiple times per month in an effort to educate beachgoers.
- Police and lifeguards patrolling the beach hand out flyers with the flag warnings, rip current information and beach rules and regulations. Beach Patrol units stop and have conversations with hundreds of beachgoers every day when they see someone doing something that may be dangerous, hazardous or illegal to try and keep our beaches and the public safe.

- The Fire Department presents multiple annual educational classes to the public and administers the lifeguard program for the town which includes over 70 hours of training, certifications and testing for each lifeguard. They also monitor beach conditions and administer the flag warning program for our entire town.
- Town staff constantly evaluate local conditions and communicate and coordinate with NOAA and other agencies to provide the most current information on conditions and warnings present for our residents and guests. We are constantly updating these conditions and posting warnings or information on our digital media platforms (Facebook, town website, text message alerts, etc..) to give residents the information they need to make good decisions. In emergency situations, we frequently put information out to the public through PSA's, Code Red notifications, PA broadcasts along the beach strand, text messages, alerts and other methods of communication.
- The town produces thousands of flyers, signs, magnets, newsletters and other informational sources annually to provide to residents and post around town to ensure that the information is available to our residents and guests.
- Our Parks and Recreation department hands out drink koozies with flag and rip current information to every person that pays to park at one of our public beach accesses. They also provide and upkeep 100 rescue buoys along the beach strand for the public to assist swimmers in trouble if they choose to.
- The lifeguards at the East and West Regional Ocean Accesses also have life jackets available for toddlers and children to use that want to borrow them for the day.

These are just some of the ways the town employee's work with local businesses and with the public to try and ensure the safety and security of all our residents and visitors.

#### **10. What can I do if I see someone in trouble?**

- Call 911 before you do anything else! Getting rescue personnel on the way should be the first priority.
- If you believe that you are an exceptionally good swimmer and are willing to provide assistance, you can grab a flotation device and go in to help if you choose to. **NEVER ENTER THE WATER TO CONDUCT A RESCUE WITHOUT A FLOTATION DEVICE!** There are 100 rescue buoys stationed on poles along the beach strand that have been provided by the town to assist those that choose to help in these situations.
- Swim close enough to the person so that you can toss them the flotation device, but not so close that they can grab you or you will become their flotation device. Talk to them and try to keep them calm until help arrives.

#### **11. When do the lifeguard's start patrolling the beach?**

Lifeguards must be United States Lifeguard Association (USLA) certified in order to serve on our beaches. The majority of lifeguards that apply are full-time college students who must complete a 74 hour training process before they can begin working. They cannot begin that process until the spring semester has ended. The earliest that we have been able to get this process completed and the lifeguards working is the week before Memorial Day each year. Our lifeguard program runs from approximately May 20th through September (Labor Day) every year. Stationary lifeguards are located at both the East and West Regional Ocean Accesses and up to 4 roving lifeguards are patrolling the beach strand on a daily basis.

### **12. Why doesn't the town have lifeguards year round?**

In order to have a program that would meet USLA standards, the town would have to post as many as 57 lifeguards on the beach strand daily. This endeavor would be cost prohibitive to the Town and is not practical or prudent even if we could get the requisite number of lifeguards, especially outside of our busy tourist season. The vast majority of our water rescue calls, take place during the months of May through September (tourist season) when people who are not necessarily familiar with the hazards associated with the ocean currents are visiting our beaches. This is the time when our program is active and while we have experienced tragic situations, the program has been extremely successful in completing hundreds of water rescues annually. For example, in 2018, Emerald Isle Lifeguards successfully rescued over 105 people in just 11 days.

### **13. What other methods has the Town tried or tested to improve rescue operations?**

Over the years we have tried many different methods to improve our rescue capabilities. We have tested motorized surfboards, used zodiac boats, tested devices that shoot ropes or flotation devices, and even tested drones to drop flotation devices. The current methods that we use are the ones that are consistently successful, reliable and effective for the conditions that we have along our beach, but we are also constantly on the lookout for the latest and greatest rescue aids, equipment or methods that will help us provide the very best assistance we can to those that visit our beaches.

### **14. Why doesn't the town put warnings up on the big signs at the bridge?**

The digital signs you see when you come across the bridge belong to the North Carolina Department of Transportation, not the Town. We have had many conversations with the NCDOT about using the signs when we have dangerous surf conditions along our beaches to warn beachgoers. Our requests have been denied by NCDOT due to regulations that restrict the use of those signs to traffic related messages only. To ensure that we are doing all we can to get the word out, the town uses our own portable message signs to inform people coming across the bridge when we have unusually rough beach conditions, and especially when the beach is under double red flag conditions.

### **15. What can I do to be safe?**

- Use common sense and take personal responsibility. Check beach conditions before you go out and know what the warning flags mean. If the water looks rough, don't go in.
- Obey the warning flags, even if you are an Olympic class swimmer! When we have to stop to address the dangers you are putting yourself in, you are taking our attention away from someone else that may need our help.
- NEVER ALLOW ANY CHILD TO GO UNATTENDED IN THE WATER! If you are more than a foot away, you are too far away from a child. Ocean currents can be extremely strong and can sweep adults off their feet in knee deep water. Children should always be in a Coast Guard Approved flotation device when in the ocean.

- Don't assume that the calmest water is the safest place to swim. The area where you don't see waves breaking is usually where a rip current is located. If you are unsure about the conditions, ask someone!
- NEVER SWIM ALONE! Always swim with a flotation device.
- Marine Life Typical feeding times are at sunrise and sunset, it is not recommended to be in the water at these times. While certain marine life feeds at different times of the day, if you notice a school of fish jumping in the water then a marine predator may be nearby.
- On calm days where the water appears flat attempt to shuffle your feet while entering the water. We experience an increase of stingray incidents when the ocean becomes flat. Calm waters allow stingrays to settle close to shore, by shuffling your feet when entering the water this disturbs the stingrays and they move away.
- Emerald Isle on many occasions experiences Portuguese Man-O-War jellyfish along our beach strand. This is due in part to our southern facing beach and our prevailing SW winds. Portuguese Man-O-War looks like blue/purple balloons floating on the surface of the water, their tentacles can reach up to 50' long. They are wind-driven and can sting both in and out of the water.

#### 16. What do I do if I get caught in a rip current?

- **REMAIN CALM!** This is the most important thing you can do. Many drownings that are attributed to rip currents every year are actually caused by a person exhausting themselves fighting against the current and going into cardiac arrest.
- Let the current take you to the release point. Most rip currents will only take you out a few hundred yards. Relax and float until it releases you and then swim parallel to the shore line. The waves will bring you back in.
- Waive your arms above your head and yell for help. Someone will see you and call for help. If you are able to swim back towards the shore, do it without exhausting yourself.

In closing, I am including another copy of some of the information published in last month's newsletter on water safety and particularly the flag system which is consistent with nationally established standards designed to communicate ocean safety conditions. I do not want to inundate anyone with too much information, but the serious nature of the concerns and the apparent remaining number of people who are not yet aware suggests that repetition is needed with public education efforts. Without intending to be overly dramatic or insensitive to those that have suffered water related tragedies in the past, everyone should take this matter as seriously as Town officials do. History has proven that someone's life may depend upon it.

As always, you are encouraged to follow Emerald Isle's website postings and other social media platforms for the latest information on the Town and all its activities.



## Warning Flag System



**YELLOW FLAGS** indicate moderate hazards and that some rip current activity is expected. You should use caution if entering the water.



**RED FLAGS** indicate dangerous rip current activity is expected and rip currents are likely to be stronger and more frequent. It is recommended that you stay out of the water.



**DOUBLE RED FLAGS** indicate the ocean is closed for swimming and you can be fined or arrested for entering the water.



**PURPLE FLAGS** indicate an abundance of potentially hazardous marine life in the vicinity, including Portuguese man-o-war, jellyfish, and other creatures.

# RIP CURRENTS

## Break the Grip of the Rip!



### IF CAUGHT IN A RIP CURRENT

- ◆ Don't fight the current
- ◆ Swim out of the current, then to shore
- ◆ If you can't escape, float or tread water
- ◆ If you need help, call or wave for assistance

### SAFETY

- ◆ Know how to swim
- ◆ Never swim alone
- ◆ If in doubt, don't go out

More information about rip currents can be found at the following web sites:

[www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov](http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov)  
[www.usla.org](http://www.usla.org)

