

EMERALD ISLE WATER SAFETY FAQ'S

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

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, visit the Town's website at www.emeraldisle-nc.org, and click on "Beach and Sound" on the homepage.

2. What do the flags mean?

- **YELLOW:** Moderate Risk – Moderate surf and/or currents are present and weak swimmers are discouraged from entering the water.
- **RED:** High Risk – Rough conditions such as strong surf and/or currents are present. All swimmers are discouraged from entering the water. Those entering the water should take great care. The Town recommends staying out of the water on red flag days.
- **DOUBLE RED:** Swimming Prohibited - indicates 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:** Marine Life Hazard – Marine pests such as jellyfish and stingrays which can cause minor injury are present in the water. This flag is not intended to indicate the presence of sharks.
- **Red/ Yellow:** Lifeguard Present – These flags may be used in pairs spaced apart to indicate a designated area or zone along a beach or waterfront that is closely supervised by qualified lifeguards, and where swimming is permitted.

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

Flags are posted in coordination with the National Weather Service and the Rip Current Forecast. In previous years, this forecast begins on April 15 and ends on October 31 of each year. 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's website at www.emeraldisle-nc.org to determine our current beach conditions. Flags are not posted year-round, as the National Weather Service doesn't issue the Rip Current Forecast year-round.

4. 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.

5. Can rental companies provide beach safety information 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 their rental units. This information explains the flags system, rip current information, beach rules and regulations and even has information about nesting sea turtles.

6. Why doesn't the Town position Jet Skis on the beach strand?

Town staff is constantly working to improve and perfect our response to all concerns in Emerald Isle. 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.

7. 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.

8. What steps are 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 hosts educational programs on beach safety, rip current dangers, and other hazards throughout the year and upon request 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 PSAs, Code Red notifications, PA broadcasts along the beach strand and other methods of communication.
- The town produces flyers, signs, magnets, newsletters and other informational sources 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 provides and upkeeps 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 employees work with local businesses and with the public to try and ensure the safety and security of all our residents and visitors.

9. 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 more than 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.

10. When do the lifeguards start patrolling the beach?

Our lifeguard program runs from approximately April 1 through September 30 every year. Stationary lifeguards are located at both the East and West Regional Ocean Accesses and up to 5 roving lifeguards are patrolling the beach strand on a daily basis. 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 70 plus-hour training process before they can begin working.

11. 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 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.

12. 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.

13. 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.

14. 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 a child to go into the water unattended! 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 an approved 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 has been known to experience 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.

15. 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 shoreline. 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.

As always, you are encouraged to follow the official Emerald Isle website at www.emeraldisle-nc.org and the Town's official social media pages for the latest information on the Town and all its activities.

Beach Warning Flags



Yellow Flag: Moderate Risk

Moderate surf and/or currents are present and weak swimmers are discouraged from entering the water.



Red Flag: High Risk

Rough conditions such as strong surf and/or currents are present. All swimmers are discouraged from entering the water. Those entering the water should take great care. The Town recommends staying out of the water on red flag days.



Double Red Flag: Swimming Prohibited

The ocean is closed for swimming. You can be fined or arrested for entering the water.



Purple Flag: Marine Life Hazard

Marine pests such as jellyfish and sting-rays which can cause minor injury are present in the water. This flag is not intended to indicate the presence of sharks.



Red/Yellow Flag: Life Guard Present

These flags may be used in pairs spaced apart to indicate a designated area or zone along a beach or waterfront that is closely supervised by qualified lifeguards, and where swimming is permitted.