

# Beauty is below the surface for Northwest divers

by Ellee Thalheimer, Special to The Oregonian  
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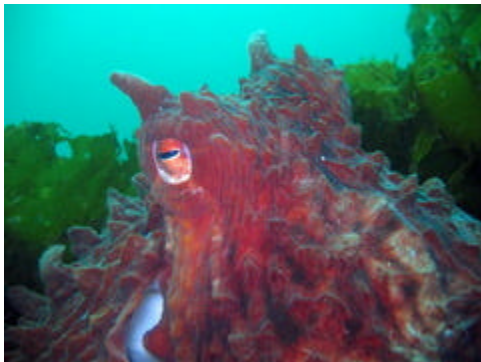


"It takes a special kind of idiot to enjoy local diving," Pacific Northwest scuba diver Josh Smith says. "I am proud to say that I am a special kind of idiot."

I was trying my hardest to be one, too, when four other divers and I arrived at Sund Rock Marine Reserve in Washington's Hood Canal. My last dive was a decade ago in Belize, but I was determined I wasn't going to be a wimp.

One of the most bracing truths about Northwest diving is that the high season is the coldest part of the year, late fall through March, when the cold water has killed off the plankton blooms.

"March is typically great for diving," says my dive instructor, Nicolle Pratt of the Seven Seas dive shop. "The water is still a little colder than summer temps, but air temps usually start to climb and visibility stays really great."



Janna Nichols/Special to The Oregonian Giant Pacific octopus

Then Pratt pointed to the seafloor, and I understood why these crazy divers are not crazy. For a region so obsessed with wilderness, few people know about the bizarre, underworld wilderness waiting to be explored -- a world full of bombastic colors usually associated with the tropics. To top it all off, sea life here is enormous, like the hulking lingcod, seals, giant Pacific octopuses and sixgill sharks.

After the gear was sorted and checked, Pratt helped me every step of the way as I descended into the bone-chilling green water. As we traveled farther from the water surface down a clam-crusting rope, I had to use all my yogic ability to calm down.

## How to dive in

**Dive shops** all over the Portland-Vancouver area sell equipment, hold beginner to advanced classes and conduct group trips. A beginner's scuba class (\$300-\$400 including rentals) requires multiple days of pool and classroom training.

After the initial financial investment, diving can be quite affordable. A couple of dive shop recommendations include:

Seven Seas Scuba Dive Centre holds a free Discover Scuba introduction to diving and is the only shop in the area certified to train dive instructors. (3200 S.E. 164th Ave., Vancouver, 360-260-9969 , [www.sevenseasscuba.com](http://www.sevenseasscuba.com))

Aquatic Sports has its own on-site training pool and an online store (10803 S.W. Barbur Blvd., Portland, 888-300-3483 , [www.aquaticsports.com](http://www.aquaticsports.com))

Web sites with dive-site reviews, local organizations, magazines, clubs, shops, boat charter businesses and more:

**Pacific NW Scuba:** [www.pnwscuba.com](http://www.pnwscuba.com)

**Northwest Dive Club:** [www.nwdiveclub.com](http://www.nwdiveclub.com)

**Oregon Scuba Divers:** [www.oregonscuba.com](http://www.oregonscuba.com)

Squished up under a rock, with its fatty, suckered tentacles underneath it, a giant Pacific octopus looked at us. If its eyeballs had eyebrows, they would have been arched disdainfully.

The huge mating wolf eels were equally unimpressed with us as we observed their private moment. Crazy-striped fish of colors that would put the '80s to shame lingered about the ocean floor as their eyes rolled maniacally, completely independent of each other.

Violet-purple starfish clung their overstuffed arms to slimy rocks. We floated past shiny orange sea squirts (whose name said it all) and sea lemon nudibranch, a squat, neon-yellow creature straight out of the most surreal chapters of the Dada movement.

Giant gardens of plumose anemone swayed with the water, their squashy stalks brandishing electric oranges or ethereal whites. Decorator crabs, which look like huge spindly spiders, clutched the anemone stalks for dear life, and translucent coonstripe shrimp bounced in and out of sight like Muppets.

By the time I was ascending, my outlook on diving in the Pacific Northwest had totally shifted. Even though I couldn't feel my feet.

## Shipwrecks and rainstorms

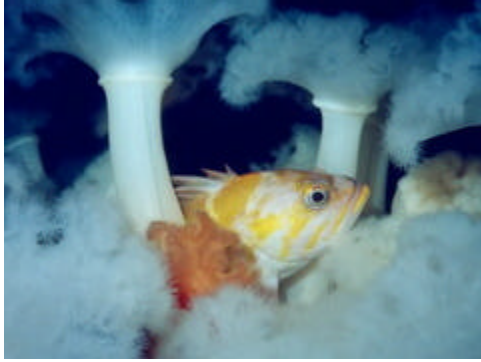
"One of the coolest aspects of diving in the Pacific Northwest is the diversity," says Bruce Higgins, a diver in the Seattle area who heads up volunteer activities at Edmonds Underwater Park in Washington.

There's wreck diving, opportunities for underwater photography, hunting, boat diving, coral reef exploration and crystal clear, freshwater lake diving.

On the other hand, it's not a perfect diving world. It's cold. Northwest divers have to be covered from head to toe with neoprene, even in the summer.

Plus, divers have to wait for it, wait for it, wait for it until inconsistent conditions are good to dive, whether it be holding out for the wind to settle or visibility-marring rainstorms to slow down.

"You have to pay greater attention and conditions are harsher, but it's a thrill diving up here," Pratt says.



Janna Nichols/Special to The Oregonian Copper rockfish

One of the best times to dive in the ocean is late fall, when the visibility starts to get good with the lessening plankton blooms, the weather is a bit warmer and rainstorms haven't reached the height of their fury.

In the summer, lake diving draws divers from all over the region. Central Oregon's popular Clear Lake boasts amazing geologic features and 100 feet of visibility.

As far as the most renowned dive sites in the Pacific Northwest, the Sunshine Coast in British Columbia and the Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands in Washington are on the A-list. The coast of Oregon hosts dive sites, but they are temperamental, more dangerous and sometimes accessible only by boat.

If you do try diving in the Northwest, you'll likely be embraced into a welcoming community of dedicated, conservation-minded folks who see past the gray weather. They look forward to swimming next to gargantuan marine life, exploring downed ships and submersing themselves in the uncanny, ancient wilderness below the surface.