

Watchable Wildlife -- Tide Pools

By Bob Garrison

California boasts over 1,100 miles of coastline and with it, some of the world's richest tidal life. Cold, nutrient-rich waters and rocky shorelines provide the perfect habitat for hundreds of species of plants, from microscopic diatoms to huge seaweeds. The plants in turn, support a multitude of wildlife normally hidden beneath the waves. At first glance, the wave-swept rocks may seem void of life, but the rocky pools exposed only at the lowest tides contain a rich stew of plants and animals plastered so thickly together that very little of the rocks show. An amazing feat considering the harshness of this wave-battered environment.

Imagine the challenge of surviving surging waves, scouring sand and the drying sun at low tide. While you're trying to keep from getting bashed about in the surf, you must hunt for food, hide from enemies and reproduce. As you think of how you would survive the elements, consider how each tide pool animal has adapted to these harsh conditions. Some species like the barnacles and anemones permanently attach themselves to the rocks and wait for the waves to carry them food. Snails and seastars clamp down on the rocks during low tides and crashing waves, but move about in search of food at high tide. Soft-bodied sea slugs and fish tend to be the most active hunters and retreat to protected coves and deep water during storms and low tides. Part of the fun of exploring tide pools comes from trying to guess why the animals look and act as they do. Nowhere else on earth can you see such diverse methods of responding to this rugged world.

To be a good tide pooler, you must also be a good detective. On land, it's easy to tell a plant from an animal, or an animal from a rock. Not so in the tide pools, especially at low tide when animals clamp down to keep from drying. Many species are masters of disguise, using camouflage colors and shapes to hide in the pools. For those willing to poke and probe in the pools at low tide, a world of bizarre animals in a vast array of colors, textures and shapes awaits you.

TIPS for Tide Pool Viewing

Tide pool viewing is not for the faint of heart. But with a willingness to get wet, some common-sense safety measures and a spirit of adventure, you will be rewarded with hours of wildlife viewing pleasure.

(* Pick up a Field Guide -- many good guides are available, but avoid the most basic guides that tend to focus on east coast species. Pacific Intertidal Life, by Ron Russo and Pam Olhausen is a great pocket guide for under five dollars.

(* Low Tides Mean High Times -- plan your trip to coincide with the lowest possible tides, generally those that occur near the times of a full or new moon. Pick up a tide chart at a sporting goods store and look for minus tides for the best viewing opportunities.

(* Stick to the Pools -- the best viewing occurs in the lowest exposed tide pools. Pass up the animals exposed to the air and watch the deep pools where animals will be feeding.

(* Look, Don't Touch and Pry -- gently push aside floating seaweed to look beneath, but leave the animals alone. Quietly watch the pool for movements to discover crabs and fish that hide from view when they are disturbed.

(* Tread Lightly -- stay out of the pools and **carefully** place each footstep to avoid stepping on sea life. Animals that can withstand crashing waves are easily crushed underfoot.

(* Collect Only Memories -- leave everything where you find it. Even the smallest shell will be used by young hermit crabs. Remember most tide pool animals are protected by strictly enforced laws to conserve this unique natural resource.

Safety First

1. Wear long pants and old tennis shoes that have good treads and cover your entire foot. Spiny sea urchins and sharp barnacles can easily cut exposed skin.
2. Walk with extreme care on the slippery rocks. Walk between rocks (don't rock hop) and stay off slippery seaweed.
3. Don't turn your back on the ocean. Occasional large waves can easily sweep the unwary into the water.
4. When exploring the tide pools at low tide, never let the incoming tide cut off your route back to shore.

Where to View Tide Pools

Follow wildlife viewing road signs or check the [California Wildlife Viewing Guide](#) for directions to the following areas:

North Coast

Patrick's Point State Park
Shelter Cove/Lost Coast Wilderness
MacKerricher State Park
Salt Point State Park

Central Coast

Fitzgerald Marine Reserve
Natural Bridges State Park
Point Lobos State Reserve
Montana de Oro State Park

South Coast

Carpinteria State Beach
Crystal Cove State Park
Cabrillo National Monument

You can purchase a [California Wildlife Viewing Guide](#) which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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