

Quick and Dirty Local Surf Forecasting

Bruce Gabrielson – NSSIA Chairman

Wave Forecasting Web Sites

Several web sites provide fairly accurate descriptions related to forecasting local surf conditions. One of the best is Swell Info at:

<http://www.swellinfo.com/surf-forecast/ocean-city-maryland.html>

Forecasting

Regardless of how accurate a web site seems to be, there are certain things you need to know to ensure you have rideable waves when you surf or give lessons in your local area.

There are six items to consider when you want to find out about how the surf will be breaking and where to go. These are

- 1 Swell direction
- 2 Swell height/period
- 3 Wind direction
- 4 Wind strength
- 5 Bottom conditions at your break
- 6 Tide

Swell Direction

Local swell directions have a major impact on where there will be surfable waves. In general along the East Coast, swells out of the north break better obviously on more north facing beaches, while southern swells can miss these beaches all together. Looking at the figure, there is a slight curve in the shoreline that can cause the swell to either reflect away from the beach or miss, particularly where the jetty or pier is located.

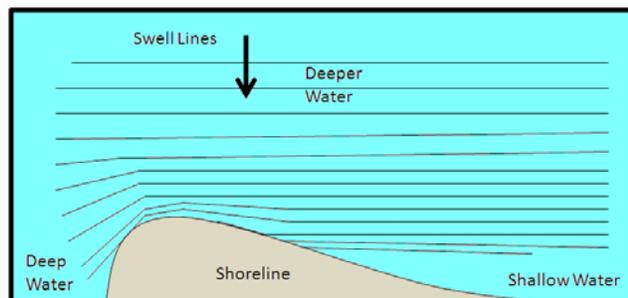
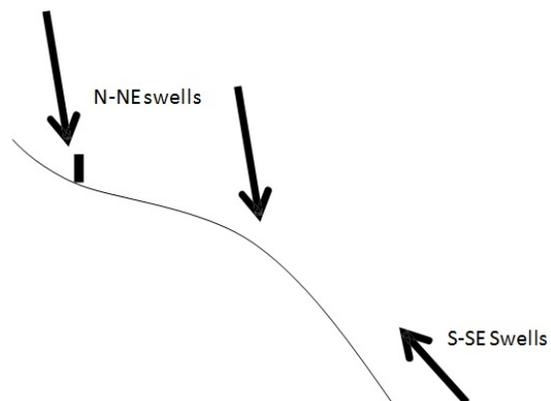
Notice in the second figure, at some point the swell lines will start to wrap when their direction is almost straight onshore. For the case of a point break, there would be waves on one side of the point with closeouts on the opposite side. Both these drawings indicate swell windows for the beaches involved.

When you have competing swells, depending on their strength, there can be a lot of chop and almost anything can happen.

That's why you also get wind swell generated chop when the land heats up in summer and the wind starts to blow out of the east onshore. It interacts with the summer south swells causing chop.

Swell Height/Period

Longer period swell means larger waves. Official weather buoys are the most accurate place to find period information.



<http://www.usno.navy.mil/FNMOC/>

Generally in traditional open beaches, anything above 8 ft becomes dangerous because of the potential for closeout. Some beaches, particularly those with outside reefs, can handle larger waves but you may have a difficult time paddling out. Slight points can also handle larger waves, but they can also become crowded if you try to give lessons there. Also, as the waves get larger, the shorebreak tends to become dangerous for inexperienced as well as experienced surfers.

Wind Strength/Direction

Wind and buoy wave height/period conditions can be found at:

<http://www.usno.navy.mil/FNMOC/>
or <http://www.windfinder.com/forecasts/>

In many areas, early morning is when there is considerably less wind. Therefore, try to get in the water by 7:30 am for the best conditions on any given day. Also, when the water temps get warmer and the land heats up, the winds tend to blow earlier. In my area, if the wind is from the north or even slightly onshore, conditions deteriorate very quickly.

Onshore winds (above 10-12 knots) will usually trash the surf. Winds above 10 knots usually generate rough surface conditions that continually get worse. Other wind directions will impact the place you chose to surf. Offshore wind below 12 knots is easily rideable but it starts to get difficult for surfing longboards with wide noses much above that wind speed.

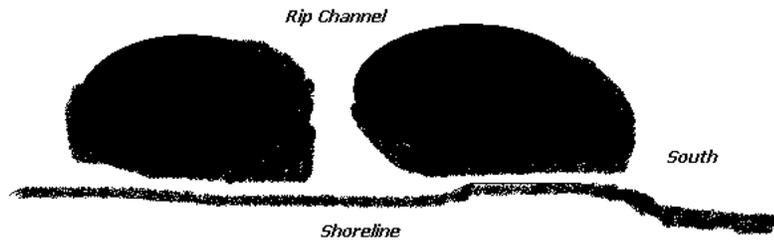
Tides

Low tides are usually fine for most breaks under waist or lower wave height conditions. When you have a flat, slightly deepening bottom contour, waves can close out quickly at waist and higher swells.

Bottom Conditions

In general, beach breaks are best for smaller swells while points and jetties are better for larger waves. Sandbars are best all-around for all tides and smaller surf. When the swell gets too strong the bars can be dangerous, particularly at low tide. Where you have sand bars, you also have rip tide channels. These are great for breaking up the waves with rideable shoulders, plus paddling out in the rip is much easier. The drawing shows what bars are shaped like. I've found this out by giving lessons on the bars at low tide over several years.

In my area, bars then to be oblong with steeper more direct channels out on the south facing sides. I believe this is due to the south swells we get in the summer months, plus this is also the reason why there are often better lefts that rights when rideable conditions exist.



When There are Ankle Slappers

Ankle slapper days are when projections say nothing will break. This isn't always the case if you know what to look for. If both the wind conditions are slow and the tide is low, it is possible to find small breaking waves at the multiple small sandbars that exist along most sand. If you decide to surf, simply stop and check out each break until you find one that is surfable. Go early because often these sandbars become crowded on nice summer days when no other place is breaking.

When there is Hurricane Surf

The largest and cleanest waves for local surfing hit in late summer and fall when hurricanes exist off the East Coast. If the hurricane is far enough out in the ocean, the wind from the hurricane won't bother the waves, and if there is no local wind the surf will be clean. The problem is that a hurricane represents a low pressure area. If it is too close to us, the wind will be hard offshore. Hard offshore in even medium size waves makes it hard to paddle in with a wider nose board.

Weather

One final comment, local wave projections on websites often do not consider weather conditions. They can project great waves when the wind is blowing so hard offshore that you can't paddle in. They also don't consider that a rain storm is in the works. Please look at the weather forecast before making a final decision.