

# Divers get RIPPED by CURRENTS

By Tom Gormley

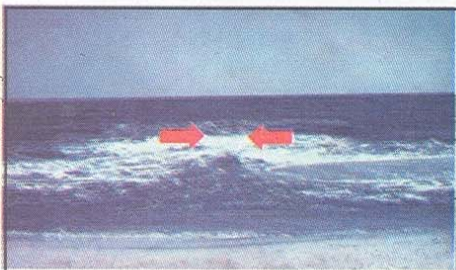
Just as a rip is a tear in a paper or fabric, a current rip is a tear in the normal flow of currents. While gently moving parallel to the beach with the current running along the shore—a long-shore current—a swimmer, snorkeler or diver may suddenly meet the rip and get pulled out to sea. Oops! A wreck diver has an easy swim on the starboard side of a wreck, turns to port at the bow or



A rip formed on the side of the groin off Deal Beach, N.J., that is usually the calm side, but on this occasion waves were causing a rip pulling out to sea alongside the rocks. Swimming parallel to the shore and away from the groin would be a good choice to get out of the rip; then swim to shore in normal water.

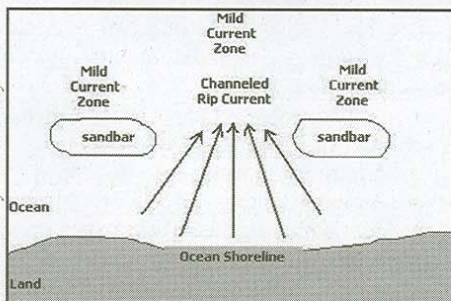
Photo by Tom Gormley

Photo credit: Courtesy of NOAA



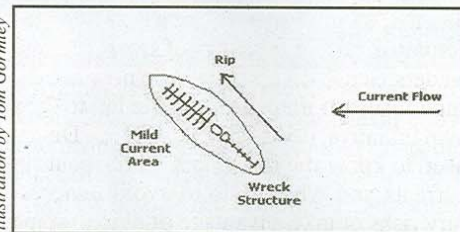
Arrows show the location of a rip current.

Illustration by Tom Gormley



A rip current forms between breaks in underwater structures such as sand bars, rocks or coral heads and funnels water between them. Divers should look for waves breaking unevenly.

Illustration by Tom Gormley



Divers on the current side of the wreck will experience a rip while divers on the lee side will have minimal current. Placement of the up line or anchor line will decide where and how divers can negotiate the wreck. When reaching the end of a wreck, always proceed carefully and determine if there is a change in current.

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stern and suddenly gets swept in a strong rip. Oops, again!

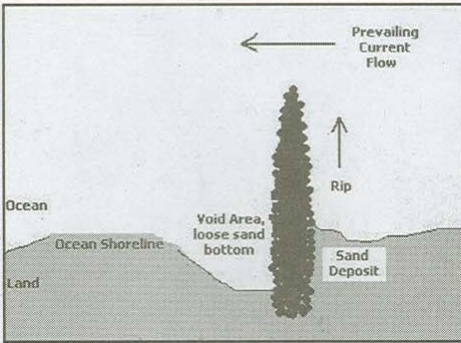
From basic scuba training divers are taught not to fight rip currents. These currents can pull non-swimmers out to sea and cause a drowning. In unprotected ocean beaches there are tragedies every year. On protected

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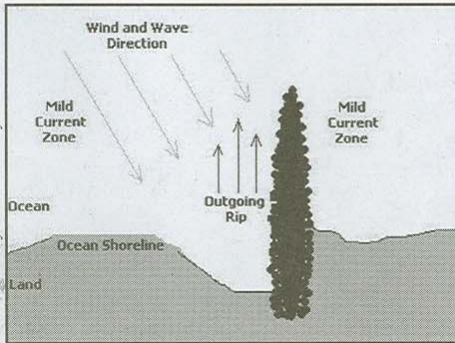
In normal conditions a rip will form on the current side or a groin or jetty. If the current is not too strong then the rip may be mild. If there is a strong long-shore current or increasing wave action then the rip will strengthen. Expect various eddy currents even on the protected side and loose bottom conditions.

beaches, lifeguards will close a beach or limit activity to ensure the safety of swimmers and waders. Scuba divers usually do not have the supervision of lifeguards and are left to their own initiative, decisions and abilities. Divers need to know the basics and more about rip currents and what to do to avoid unnecessary risks or take advantage of a rip in some circumstances.

The basic rip current begins as a normal outflow of water away from shore, but due to structural changes in underwater contours, the outflow becomes channeled and unusually strong. Humans caught in the rip have difficulty swimming back to shore against the rip current and become fatigued and overwhelmed. Divers are equipped with large fins and usually have more ability than the average swimmer, but divers also have heavier gear and greater friction swimming through the water. Sometimes divers can hold a side or bottom structure to assist moving against the current. All things being equal, there are overwhelming situations for any individual attempting to swim against a rip current.

If caught in a rip current, we have been taught to swim sideways and get out of the current or let it carry us to where it dissipates and side swim around it. Avoiding it before getting caught is better.

Illustration by Tom Gormley



The sand buildup to the right of a barrier is from the normal prevailing current coming from right to left. When the current changes to the opposite side, a rip forms. The rip on the deep side can be stronger than the shallow side because of a longer catch zone.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration advises that rip currents can be identified by:

- A channel of churning, choppy water.
- An area having a notable difference in water color.
- A line of foam, seaweed, or debris moving steadily seaward.
- A break in the incoming wave pattern.

Barriers such as groins, jetties, walls and piers are very common structures where divers may encounter a rip current while

shore diving. They also can form along underwater ridges and wrecks where divers may find them while boat diving. Always be aware of rip currents, but remember not to fight them and risk exhaustion. Many times a decision to dive another day or at another location will be prudent. Learn more about rip currents at the NOAA Web site: [www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/overview.shtml](http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/overview.shtml)

Tom Gormley is an avid northeast diver and writer. He can be reached through [www.safescuba.com](http://www.safescuba.com).

### Shore Diving In New Jersey

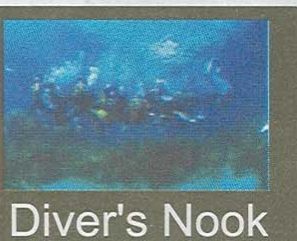
By Tom Gormley & Ben Gualano



The 227 page - 3rd Edition of "Shore Diving in New Jersey" is packed With up to date information on where, When, and how to dive throughout NJ's Lake, river, inlet, and ocean shores. Find it at your local shop or through: [www.safescuba.com](http://www.safescuba.com)

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