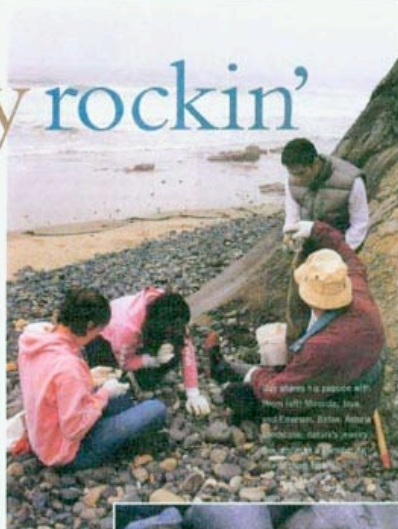


really rockin'

Spend an afternoon hanging out with Guy DiTorrice, the fossil-hunting Pied Piper of the Oregon coast.



DiTorrice is joined by his wife, Mary, and their children, Brian, Peter & Susan, during a family fossil hunt.



Guy DiTorrice



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With one solid stroke. Guy DiTorrice cracks open a baseball-size rock. Three teenagers and I peer at the two halves in his palm.

"See the swirls, the swoosh," he says. "What do you think it is?"

"A shell?" ventures 17-year-old Jaya Wisner.

"Right!" says Guy with the enthusiasm of a proud teacher, which indeed he is. But Guy's classroom is an Oregon beach, the subject is fossils, and the textbooks are piles of rocks.

Guy has led fossil expeditions for five years along Oregon's central coast near Newport, but the fossil-hunting bug bit him more than 40 years ago in his Illinois hometown (coincidentally named Rockford). In 1993, Guy came to Newport, where the passion really took hold*especially during his time as public relations director for the Oregon Coast Aquarium. These days he earns his living as a credit union regional manager, but weekends find Guy on the beach. Not sunning or kite flying, he's forever poking through debris looking for the perfect fossil.

Before the kids and I start our own fossil prospecting, we're treated to Guy's lively 20-minute orientation and safety lecture. "Keep an eye on the ocean*sneaker waves are called that for a reason. And watch your footing on the rocks." He checks everyone's feet to make sure they're wearing sturdy, no-nonsense shoes.

We're good to go. Guy boasts his favorite beachcombing footwear: calf-high rubber waders, \$19 a pair at the hardware store.

To Guy, no rock is ho-hum. He uncovers a tray full of specimens cleaved to reveal 30-million-year-old shells with perfect arches, delicate fish fins, a graceful bird feather, and the business end of a crab claw.

"Wow," says Jaya, in unison with her 14-year-old cousin, Miranda Herzog, and 19-year-old Emerson Estrada. Guy has captured the teens' attention. They suddenly realize that piles of rocks on the beach are more than nature's flotsam.

"Rocks don't have personality, but fossils do," Guy tells us. "If you see swirls, diamond shapes, something's up." These telltale circles, "smiles," and swooshes are actually fossil impressions, anything from a bird's beak to an ancient shell. We're told to check out the tan, gray, and dark-brown rocks and to ignore the black basalt. If we find straight lines and color variations, it might be petrified wood.

"Mud is the best place for animals to die," Guy says. "Sand is next—at least from a fossil hunter's perspective." The coast around Newport serves as a veritable fossil graveyard, including today's snug locale. Schooner Point. The Yaquina Head lighthouse anchors the south end of the cove, and a rocky headland tucks us in to the north.

We're ready—heck, eager—to do a little fossil scavenging, and Guy gives us canvas specimen bags, white cotton gloves, magnifying glasses, and small plastic sand rakes. For the next 90 minutes, we scramble over the cobble piles, picking up likely suspects and handing them to Guy to crack open.

The Oregon shoreline averages about 70 million years in age, but Guy says this particular setting is a youthful 15 million to 30 million years old. During that time, a sort of lasagna-layering of compressed volcanic ash, Astoria Formation sandstone, and Nye mudstone has created fossil-rich stretches of beach. Winter weather attacks the coast, eroding the fossil beds on and near shore and making January and February optimum fossil-hunting months. But even in the mellow summers and early falls, geologic remnants can be found. Today we're all spotting fossil treasures.

Guy takes a fist-size rock and separates it rather dramatically, revealing a delicate etching hidden for centuries. It's a 20-million-year-old baby-dolphin skull. Emerson's eyes widen, and Jaya and Miranda chorus, "Ohhh!"

When our canvas bags are heavy with beach plunder, we head back to the parking lot, and Guy pulls out a cache of gear to help us classify the haul. Miranda has found fossilized seal poop, which she vows to keep forever. Emerson zips up his plastic bag of fossils and heads for his car. "I don't guess I'll ever think about rocks the same way," he says.