

How to Spot a Rip Current

First, let a trained eye spot it!

When you arrive at the beach you should ask the lifeguard if there are any rip currents. If there are no lifeguards at the beach you should take a few moments to look at the surf to try to identify any rip currents.

Rip currents are often very difficult to spot in the surf. But sometimes there are a few telltale signs to look for including:

1) If the water is clear a rip current may appear darker than the surrounding water. This darker water will help you identify where the break in the sand bar is and where a rip current will likely be located.



Photo courtesy of Chris Brewster, USLA. Note the rip current (left of the person near the surf) flanked by breaking waves.

2) Turbidity within a rip may give the current a dirty or muddy appearance. This occurs since the rip is carrying sediment away from the beach and is an excellent clue.

3) There may be a foam neck visible, especially if the conditions are rough.

4) In areas where waves do not break and are flanked by breaking waves may signify a rip current.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Wendy Carey, Delaware SeaGrant. Note the foam neck extending out into the surf.

5) There may be seaweed or the water itself may be seen heading seaward.

Additional Tips: Look at the water with polarized sunglasses. These types of sunglasses will reduce glare, and help you spot a rip. Do not hesitate to ask a lifeguard where rip currents may be located. Lifeguards are very familiar with their beaches, including where a rip current may develop or already exists.