

Bizarre. Fascinating. Odd. All describe the collection of strange underwater creatures featured in the Oregon Coast Aquarium's new exhibit, *Oddwater*.

By Anne Laufe

'Where it's okay to be weird'

# Oddwater at the Oregon Coast

"They look like aliens," my 7-year-old son Sam shouts as he gazes at the tiny blue jellies in one of the tanks.

"Oh my gosh, look at this!" calls out another young visitor.

"Oh my god!" exclaims the adult by her side.

We're surrounded by shouts of wonder and surprise as we enter the new exhibit at the Oregon Coast Aquarium. *Oddwater*, featuring creatures from the deepest, darkest depths of the ocean, really will have the entire family squealing and gawking in amazement.

All of the animals included in the exhibit have adapted to their surroundings in odd, and sometimes unexpected, ways. Take the blue jelly (catostylus mosaicus), for example. These compact creatures have developed a symbiotic relationship with algae; algae living inside the jellies photosynthesize, converting light into energy that the jelly uses.

While kids want to rush from one strange-looking creature to another, it's worth trying to slow them down to read the short explanations of how and why the organisms developed. Or consider going through the exhibit twice, taking time to read the explanations the second time through.

My son Sam and my 10-year-old daughter, Sadie, were especially taken with the puffer fish in the first room of the exhibit. One species, aptly named a porcupinefish, defends itself by sucking in air or water and puffing up like a big ball when threatened. The long spines covering its body stick out sharply when the fish is inflated.

Despite this fierce habit, my kids note that it looks like the puffers are smiling. "They look happy," concurs my husband. And why shouldn't they be? With their bodies inflated to three times their normal size, the fish are well-protected against predators.

## Tangs and triggerfish

What I like best in this room are the tangs and triggerfish, displayed in a cylindrical tank so you can see them from all sides. This actually turns out to be my favorite exhibit in all of *Oddwater*. Their colors and patterns and strange adaptations remind me anew how awesome nature can be. A changing screen and names that perfectly describe each fish help me identify the different varieties.

The orange shoulder tang, racoon butterflyfish (with a black mask), clown tang and convict tang (wearing striped prisoner's garb) are all easy to spot. And nothing else looks like the unicorn tang, an off-white fish with a "horn" growing from its forehead.

Proving that it's not just adults who find these creatures enchanting, several youngsters point to the striking azure fish in the tank, which turns out to be the magnificent blue tang. The children cry out fondly, "Look, there's Dory!" (Disney and their blockbuster

*Finding Nemo* may have done more to protect the oceans than Jacques Cousteau ever could.)

The Picasso triggerfish is another sight to behold. Known in Hawaiian as "humu humu nuku nuku apua'a", and popularized in a song from the movie *High School Musical 2* (what is it with Disney and tropical fish?), one look at the intricate lines on its sides will explain the first part of its name. The second part comes from its ability to lock its spine into place like a trigger, which it then uses to scratch and cut other fish.

Eye-catching blown art glass, created by local artist Ryan Bledsoe, adds another element to the displays in *Oddwater*. Some of Bledsoe's works are for sale in the aquarium gift shop.

## Underwater and tactile experiences

In the next room of the exhibit, kids (and agile adults) can crawl through a short tunnel and stand up surrounded by dozens of lookdown fish. This is probably as close to deep-sea diving as most of us will get! So named because the shape and setting of their eyes make it appear that they're always looking down, these compact silver fish make a grunting sound when disturbed.

We hear more squeals of delight as we near the touch pool in the center of the exhibit. It's filled with stingrays, skates and two kinds of small sharks, the brown-banded bamboo shark and the Australian marble shark. Once they learn that the animals won't bite or sting them, even the youngest toddlers reach into the tank to discover how smooth the skates and rays are.

My family also loves the longhorn cowfish. These small yellow fish have appeared on many of the billboards advertising the *Oddwater* exhibit, and for good reason. They are so odd, they hardly look real. The horns in front and spines on their rear make them difficult for predators to swallow. When they're stressed they release a deadly toxin, but they're so cute, with their pursed lips and boxy shape, we all want to take one home with us.

The final tank in the exhibit houses several of the world's largest crabs. The Japanese spider crab has a leg span of 13 feet and can live to be 100 years old. Though the information card says that they are really docile, gentle creatures, we decide we wouldn't want to mess with one.

Next to one of the tanks in the exhibit is a quotation by eminent marine biologist Sylvia Earle. It reads, "You have to love it before you are moved to save it." Your kids, like mine, are sure to fall in love with the beautiful, ingenious and strange creatures of *Oddwater*, a first step to ensuring their continued survival.

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