

# Beachcombers! Alert!

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CURTIS C. EBBESMEYER, Ph.D.

## Beer Tanks

by Curtis C. Ebbesmeyer

— *Six giant beer fermenters roll overboard into the English Channel*



*Beer Fermentation Tank* (left) stranded in the Western Isles of Scotland (map).

Certain beaches tend to collect specific kinds of flotsam. Exposed to the full blast of the Atlantic, the Western Isles of Lewis, Harris, Uist, Benbecula and Barra are some of Scotland's most remote islands. On Uist, there's a strand of shore known as Stinky Bay because fermenting seaweed collects there. Rotting seaweed is but one of many dimensions of fermentation to be combed on the beach.

On December 29, 2007, a dog walker on Poll Na Crann Beach — known locally as Stinky Bay — near Griminish on the west coast of Benbecula, discovered an immense tank measuring 89 feet long and 20 feet in diameter. So big was it that motorists from the main road spied the great tank. It proved a major tourist attraction and had to be anchored lest it float away and pose a

danger to shipping.

Stinky Bay is not far from the Island of Eriskay where the vessel *SS Politician* wrecked on February 5, 1941, with an estimated 264,000 bottles of Scotch Whiskey. The incident in which islanders recovered numerous bottles was made famous by **Compton Mackenzie's** 1946 best selling novel *Whiskey Galore*. Beach fermentation now included rotting seaweed and whiskey, but more was in store.

Speculation immediately ensued as to what it was and whence the giant tank originated. Was it a rocket booster stage from the US Space Program? Was it a farm silo? Web browsers soon noticed that it resembled the fermentation tanks recently shipped to a Coors brew-

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## Beer Tanks

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ery. In 1987, Coors built a beer plant in Elkton, Virginia, to blend, package and distribute seven million barrels annually to East Coast markets. In 2006, Coors upgraded the Elkton plant to a full-scale brewery because Rockingham County has excellent water supply and water quality. For the expansion, Coors ordered 40 fermenters from the German company Ziemann — each stainless steel tank measured 20 by 70 feet, and weighed 78,000 pounds.

I verified that all forty of the Coors tanks were accounted for. Furthermore, the tank at Stinky Bay looked fresh with little marine growth. It could not have been drifting for years about the North Atlantic. So my search continued.

Nineteen days earlier (December 10, 2007) and 700 nautical miles to the south, a violent storm struck the Atlantic approach to the English Channel between Land's End on the UK side, and Finistere on the French side (from Latin *Finis Terræ*, meaning end of the earth). The vessel *Stropus* lost power in 30-foot seas, and a helicopter rescued eight seafarers. The vessel *Krokus* lost several lorries and was towed to Brest. Three container ves-

sels lost 17 reefer boxes, and another vessel lost a cargo of timber.

In the storm, a Filipino seaman drowned after falling from the 424-foot long multi-purpose cargo vessel *Normed Bremen*. Six huge beer fermenters also fell overboard. They, too, had been constructed in Ziemann, but these were being shipped from Antwerp to Turkey. Five of the six tanks washed up on the nearby coasts of Ireland and France. As for the sixth tank, floating high out of the water, the winds dispatched it to Scotland. Having drifted 700 miles in 19 days (37 miles per day), it is a wonder that it did not result in a mishap at sea.

I calculated that the tank beached at Stinky Bay was capable of holding more than a million pints of beer. To match the Elkton plant's packaging capacity, Coors' 40 fermenters will produce 43 million pints annually. The fermenter in Stinky Bay could produce beer annually worth more than \$100 million.

Thinking about all this beer made me thirsty, so I called *Beachcombers' Alert* treasurer **Dave McCroskey**. Within the hour, we hoisted a few pints at a local tavern. Story first reported to *Alert HQ* by **Judy d'Albert**, Newport Beach, California. ■

**Pass the Alert to a Friend!**



*The Motor Vessel Normed Bremen* from which six beer tanks fell overboard in a storm in the English Channel off Cape Finistre, France (X on map). Five of the tanks washed ashore in nearby France and the UK. The sixth tank drifted for three weeks and 700 miles north to the Western Isles of Scotland.

# Rubber Ducky Frenzy

by Curtis Ebbesmeyer (from *The Wall Street Journal* (Opinion section), August 8, 2007)

As if we didn't have enough real problems to worry about, an international media frenzy has erupted over a flotilla of "yellow rubber duckies" from the Pacific Ocean. The ducks are supposedly about to storm the beaches of the British Isles, 15 years after they spilled off a container ship 10,000 miles away. Reporters from Scotland, England, Germany, several other EU countries, Canada, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the U.S. have been emailing me urgent questions about the ducks: Have they been sighted in Britain yet? When will they land, and where?

I have been tracking these wayward bathtub toys for 15 years, with the help of an international network of dedicated beachcombers. We have collected data on these floaters — where they beach, and when — in order to better understand the oceans' currents: where they flow, how fast they flow, and how and when they interconnect.

Based on thousands of data points, I'm sorry to say I can't give the media scribes the story they want. And I'm sorry to have to give the good people of Britain and Ireland the disappointing news: There is no yellow rubber ducky flotilla approaching your shores. First of all, let's get the facts straight. The 29,000 celebrated bathtub toys that fell into the Pacific in January 1992 aren't made of rubber, they're plastic. And they aren't all ducks. They came in four shapes: green frogs, true-blue turtles, red beavers, and yellow crouching ducks — the latter two have by now been bleached white. Perhaps a hundred of them have made it to the North Atlantic and are now scattered across its vast expanse. We know they can travel that far — in 2003, one duck washed up on the Maine coast and a green frog was found on the coast of Scotland. Their 11-year journey began in the central Pacific, about where the International Date Line crosses the 45<sup>th</sup> parallel. They proceeded eastward to southeast Alaska, where beachcombers recovered thousands of their fellows. From there, the two toys drifted north to the Bering Sea, across the North Pole, south along eastern Greenland, and further south to Newfoundland, where their paths diverged — one to Maine and the other to Britain.

To complete these journeys, they had to ride four circular oceanic currents called "gyres" or "carousels of the seas." To understand these gyres, we have also tracked 80,000 Nike shoes lost in another North Pacific cargo spill (each one bearing a code for the container from which it

spilled), 34,000 spilled hockey gloves, five million Lego pieces lost off England's Land's End and Japanese survey stakes that typhoons have washed out into the Pacific. Not to mention fishing boats, aircraft parts, bowling balls, lobster-pot tags, toy tops, piggy banks and myriad other objects likewise lost at sea — and, of course, messages in bottles. Every item that makes it to shore has a story to tell and data to impart.

By roaming the world's beaches and seeing what washes up, we have also learned that there is far too much man-made stuff floating on the seas, especially stuff made out of plastic — now found in eight vast oceanic garbage patches. Most of it does not biodegrade. It just breaks down into ever smaller pieces, to the size of confetti and, finally, dust. Fish, birds and other marine animals eat this pseudo-plankton and pass it up the food chain, or die of starvation. Our world-wide litter is poisoning the seas, the creatures within them, and ultimately, ourselves.

Furthermore, we are only now discovering how susceptible these currents are to changing air flows, rising ocean temperatures and growing river inputs as the world warms and glaciers melt. I hope the intense and widespread interest in the tub toys' journeys will yield greater concern for our oceans. These humble toys have piqued curiosity and stimulated imaginations around the world, but they can also yield important scientific data. If you spot one of the bath tub toys, please take a picture, look for the words "The First Years" imprinted on each duck (see photos at [www.beachcombers.org](http://www.beachcombers.org)), and send a note to [curtisebbesmeyer@comcast.net](mailto:curtisebbesmeyer@comcast.net). You might also consider joining the beachcombers who patrol and clean our shorelines. You can help us better understand and protect our magical but fragile oceans and their powerful, circulating currents.

Dr. Ebbesmeyer is co-author, along with Eric Scigliano, of "*Flotsametrics and The Floating World*," forthcoming from *Smithsonian Books / Harper Collins* in April 2009. ■



*Japanese Road Markers in Kamilo, Hawaii.* During several trips (2005-2007) to Kamilo Beach near South Point on the Big Island of Hawaii, **Noni Sanford** discovered these five markers thought to have washed from highways or railroads in Japan. Their specific origin remains a mystery. *Dave Ingraham photo.*

# Aluminum Phosphide Canisters

by Curtis C. Ebbesmeyer

## *Beachcombers, be careful what flotsam you open!*

During the annual *Dash for Trash* held Sunday morning March 2, 2007, at the *Ocean Shores' Beachcombers' Fun Fair*, dozens of beachcombers brought a ton of trash for me to sort and judge. I awarded five prizes for the most interesting flotsam (winners from first to fifth place: **Doug Crosswhite; Janiece West; Donnelson Family; Dean and Andy Christenson; Hart Family**). Each winner picked a prize from the exquisite sea shells and coral donated by **Vicki Weinstein**, owner of the local shop *Flowers By The Sea*.

The *Dash for Trash* netted many aluminum cans which we recycled, beer bottles, a couple dozen Japanese oyster spacer pipes used in Japan for oyster aquaculture operations, and half a dozen aluminum canisters each resembling a thermos. Doug Crosswhite is shown here holding the one he found. Immediately, I recognized their danger from an earlier *Alert* story. On September 1, 2003, along the Dutch coast at Zandvoort, **Wim Kruiswijk** found three such canisters.

The 24-centimeter-tall Dutch containers came capped

with double-winged white plastic tops. Suspicious, Wim turned them over to the local police who forwarded them to the forensic institute in The Hague. Chemical analyses revealed that they had contained aluminum phosphide, a highly toxic poison used to kill rats. Aluminum phosphide is a chemical compound used as a rodenticide, insecticide and fumigant to kill small vermin such as moles, rabbits and rodents infesting stored cereal grains. Alarm to the entire Dutch coast revealed four more.

Halfway around the world, I spread the alarm. I kept one canister at the *Beachcombers' Alert* booth, telling passersby of the danger they posed. Some mentioned that they had found, opened and smelled them. **Steve Green**, docent at the *Ocean Shores Interpretive Center* mentioned that he had picked up 20-30 canisters since November 2007 in the vicinity of Ocean Shores. **Russ Lewis** found about ten on Long Beach in December 2007. **Jerry Cross** found 50-60 near Copalis during January-

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# Russian Sonar Tow Fish

by Curtis C. Ebbesmeyer

On Sunday, July 10, 2005, fourteen miles off the Washington state coast, **Captain Erik Eide** of the Trawler Windjammer spotted something large on the water. From miles off, it looked to be a dead whale. Closer up, it resembled a barnacle-encrusted missile with wings. Hoping it would be worth something, he hauled it aboard. The photos show the flotsam along side (left), being hoisted aboard (middle), and on deck (right).

Captain Eide and his crew scraped away some of the marine growth. When they discovered Cyrillic letters, he phoned the U.S. Coast Guard. Minutes later, a Coast Guard helicopter with U.S. Navy personnel aboard flew overhead to inspect the Windjammer's catch. Coast Guard personnel told him to expect a Coast Guard vessel shortly.

When the vessel pulled alongside, a Coastie with an M-16 rifle jumped aboard the Windjammer along with two Navy officers with digital cameras who quickly photographed the object and transmitted images to the Bangor Navy submarine base. The Navy ordered Eide to head to Port Angeles. Once there, the Navy took custody of Eide's catch.

Remembering something similar on the Discovery Channel, Captain Eide hypothesized that the flotsam was a type of sonar towed by a submarine. The Navy officers agreed. **Jeri L. Robinson**, public affairs officer at US

Navy northwest, later said that it weighed two tons and measured 18 feet long by 21 inches in diameter. The wings, according to Captain Eide, appeared to be some kind of composite material.

The flotsam's fuselage, according to navy officers, was constructed from inch-thick titanium worth a few thousand dollars as scrap. Furthermore, it was designed to be towed behind a submerged sub, providing coverage for the vessel's sonar blind spot dead astern. It could also be floated to transmit signals to communications satellites while the sub itself remained submerged.

Navy examiners believe it was manufactured in the late 1980s or early 1990s and was still in use up to about 18 months before it was recovered, when it apparently broke loose. Captain Eide figured that the sonar fish had been in the water for at least a year. I used these times to estimate where a Russian submarine might have lost its sonar fish. The average drift path upcurrent of the location where the fish was found lies out in the Pacific between Washington and Japan. From my historical drift files, I found 18 messages in bottles (MIBs) which drifted 5,000 nautical miles between these locations. The elapsed times for these MIBs averaged 26.2 months. Calculating where the sonar fish would have been 12 to 18 months upcurrent toward Japan, places it out in the mid-Pacific Ocean in the vicinity of the International Date Line some 2,290-3,435 miles west of Washington.

I hope Alert readers will come forth with the Cyrillic notation so that the sonar fish may be traced.■



## Canisters

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February 2008. And **Jennie** and **John Heilman** of Port Angeles found 20 canisters during the spring and summer of 2007 in the vicinity of Lake Ozette. All totaled, I guessed that during the year between spring 2007 and spring 2008, beachcombers had recovered hundreds of canisters in the 120 miles between Long Beach and Lake Ozette, Washington.

**Eddie L. Mitchell**, president of *Beacon Pest Control* who had the booth next to mine, jumped away when I asked him to open and sniff one. A few days later the story ran in *The Seattle Times* and that day (Thursday

March 7, 2008) Q13 TV called me for an interview for a broadcast that night. The reporter said that the *Washington State Department of Ecology* and *Coast Guard* out of Portland, Oregon, were searching the beaches. Thus far, no canister has come ashore bearing its paper label. Stamped into the bottom of one canister, I was able to make out the following code: 06-5-8-1-3-5. Perhaps this code will enable investigators to trace these canisters to those who carelessly discarded them.

I thank those who helped with the *Dash for Trash*: **Debbie Anderson**, **John Anderson**, **Dave Ingraham**, **Ernie Johnson**, **Helen Lord**, **Anneka Vandoorninck** and the many who scoured the beaches for the canisters.■

# Clayton's Flap

by Curtis C. Ebbesmeyer

"This past April, 2007, I was beachcombing down Baja way at Malarrimo near Guerro Negro," Clayton Krause wrote me. "A friend told me the following account. In 1997, he came across the flap of an F-14 Tomcat stranded on the beach. Being at a remote location, he could not lug the flap back to civilization. But he did manage to pry off the aluminum tag with the following ID numbers (photo): AIRCRAFT MOD: F-14D(R); MFR CODE: 26512; PART NO: A51B92394-9; CONTR. NO: N000 19 88 C0276; SERIAL NO: AL 924 093; MODIFICATION INCORPORATED: TD MOD PER A5MB32126-1."

When he returned, Clayton wrote to the Navy. He received a photo of an F-14 and a short letter saying that the flap came from an F-14 Tomcat operating off the coast of Mexico in 1995. The aircraft landed safely back at San Diego. How, I wondered, did the flap come to be separated from its mother aircraft? And how could a jet fly 500 miles missing a flap?

The F-14 is formidable. Its maximum takeoff weight is 75,000 pounds. It measures 62 feet long by 64 feet across with its wings in the unswept position and can narrow to 38 feet with its wings retracted to the fully swept position. Carrying 2,385 gallons, the F-14D can sortie 150 miles from an aircraft carrier, loiter for two hours, and still make several passes on its return to the carrier. At sea level, its maximum speed is 912 mph, and at 40,000 feet it can attain 1,544 mph.

The first code on the tag [F-14D(R)] revealed a great deal of Air Force history. The F-14D designation had originally been assigned to a cost-reduced, stripped down version of the Tomcat proposed at a time when the F-14A was rapidly increasing in cost. The F-14D originated in 1984 as an advanced Tomcat derivative that was to be developed in parallel with the F-14A. The variants were to remedy some of the defects of the earlier models (compressor stall; avionics).

The first production F-14D was flown on February 9, 1990. Externally, the most obvious difference between the F-14D and the F-14A is the presence of the dual chin pod under the nose of the F-14D that contains both the Television Camera System and the Infrared Search and Track. Grumman had hoped to deliver at least 12 "new-build" F-14Ds to the Navy every year through 1998, while also re-manufacturing many of the earlier F-14As to F-14D standards. However, in an economy move in 1989, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney decided that the entire F-14D pro-

gram should be terminated. However, the Navy still wanted more F-14Ds, and Secretary of the Navy H. Lawrence Garrett issued a strong appeal for at least 132 "new-build" F-14Ds from 1992 onward. Secretary Cheney turned this proposal down flat, and went a step further in March 1991, and deleted all F-14D production funds from the Fiscal Year 1992 budget. This was a catastrophe for Grumman, stopping Tomcat production in its tracks and forcing massive layoffs.

Thirty-seven of the planned 127 new-build F-14Ds were completed before the program was cancelled. The last F-14D was delivered to the Navy on July 20, 1992. Another 18 F-14Ds were produced by conversions of existing F-14As, these planes being re-designated F-14D(R) upon completion of the conversions. A total of 104 F-14R (one of which lost its flap at Baja) conversions were originally planned, but the program was cut way back in the 1989 budget reduction. A total of 55 F-14D new-builds and conversions were produced. This was enough to equip only three front-line squadrons (VF-2 *Bounty Hunters*, VF-11 *Red Rippers*, VF-31 *Tomcatters*). ■

*ID Tag from F-14 jet*



## Drifting Net

“I came across part of a drift net the other day (February 13, 2008), a possible locator, buoys, and what appeared to be the remains of a bamboo raft / float,” wrote **Mark Michael** of Dive Rota, on Rota Island in the Western Pacific Ocean. The photo collage shows the raft afloat (bottom), collected on the dock (upper left), and an enlargement of the locator (upper right). “The bamboo section had a few compartments full of water. The locator buoy carried a number (2884) and code (GYT2), but no identification plate or other markings.”

“The net was found inside Sasanhaya Bay, Rota, Northern Mariana Islands about half a mile out of our East Dock and probably no more than 200 yards offshore at the nearest land point (net location: 14°07.083' North Latitude, 145°08.515' East Longitude). It was drifting back out to sea along the Songsong Village / Wedding Cake Mountain Peninsula when we pulled enough of it up on the boat to tow the whole collection back to our East Harbor.” Mark Michael photos



**Beeswax.** Surfer **Mike Ehlon** (right) holds a chunk of beeswax found in 2005 near Nehalem, Oregon. In early December 2007, some 220 miles to the south near Gold Beach, Oregon, just after a vicious storm, **Loretta LeGuee** found a 10-pound chunk. Some beeswax beachcombed in years past has carried codes such as ‘67’ (center).

From radiocarbon dates of the wax and analyses of pieces of Chinese porcelain that have also washed up in the vicinity of Nehalem, historians believe the vessel was a Spanish galleon which sank while plying the historic Manila-Acapulco trade route. **Rick Rogers**, author of *Shipwrecks of Hawaii*, and an authority on wrecks along the west coast of North America, believes the wreck to be either the *Santo Christo de Burgos* which sank in 1693, or the *San Francisco Xavier* which disappeared in 1705. **Gordon Miller** has reconstructed a galleon as she wrecked in the surf at Nehalem (left).

Project leader **Scott Williams** of Washington State’s Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation is leading a team of archaeologists, geologists and historians to locate the wreck. They hope that modern scientific techniques — remote sensing, global positioning, ground penetrating radar, magnetometry — will locate the ship’s hull. According to shipping records, the *San Francisco Xavier* was carrying 150,000 pounds of beeswax. Beeswax was a major trade item at the time, as the Catholic Church used only that substance for its candles. Because the New World lacked native honey bees, merchants shipped tons of wax produced by large Asian honey bees in the Philippines.

See *Science*, *The American Association for the Advancement of Science*, January 4, 2008 Volume 319, Number 5,859; *Seattle Times*, March 3, 2008.

# Killer Whale Fin

by Curtis C. Ebbesmeyer

On Tuesday May 22, 2007, **Ed Girard** of *Washington State Parks*, discovered a dorsal fin and part of the back severed from a killer whale near Twin Harbors State Park, south of Westport, Washington. Park rangers removed the carcass from the beach and **Annie Douglas** and **Sara McClelland** from *Cascadia Research* picked up the remains and transported them to Olympia, where **Brad Hanson** of the *Northwest Fisheries Science Center* picked them up for examination in Seattle.

Based on the state of decomposition, the whale had probably been dead less than five days. Other whale parts washed up about the same time, including the fin, intestines and a large piece of blubber. These findings imply the whale was cut up. The remainder of the whale has not been found.

The fin (61 centimeters high) appeared to be that of an adult female, and was determined to be a mammal-eating killer whale. There was one small notch in the fin that could be used to identify the individual. **Graeme Ellis** (*Fisheries and Oceans Canada*) identified the whale as T086, an adult female that has been known since 1984 to range from central California north to southeast Alaska. This is the second transient killer whale to have died in the Pacific Northwest within the last month.

*"To be perfectly honest, we don't really know what happened,"* wrote **Jessie Huggins**, *Cascadia* stranding coordinator. *"We have little to go on. We believe that the fin was removed after death — given the nature of the cuts, it appears to have been removed with a knife. That would have been extremely difficult, probably impossible, to do on a live animal. The retrieval of the fin from the beach required heavy equipment (or could have been done with six or so people), so it is unlikely that it was done as a prank. One initial theory was that it may have been caught up in some gear out at sea and had to be cut out, but as we don't really have much to go*



**Killer Whale Fin.** *On Tuesday May 22, 2007, Ed Girard discovered this dorsal fin which had been cut from a dead killer whale. The fin weighing approximately 150 pounds is shown in a pick up truck for transport to forensic examiners. Photo with permission by Dr. Robin Baird.*

*on, that is conjecture at this point. It has been puzzling for all of us. We've never had a case like this before."* *Cascadia Research*, Olympia, WA 98501 Contact information: Robin W Baird, (360)943-7325, email: [rwbaire@cascadiaresearch.org](mailto:rwbaire@cascadiaresearch.org). *Cascadia Research* has lost tags deployed on a pilot whale, Cuvier's beaked whale, and a humpback whale. Please report washed up tags. *Story lead from Tom Owen, George R. Pierce and Associates, Seattle.* ■

**Remember to Subscribe!**

# Rocket Motor

"Hi Curtis. Our mutual friend **Marge Bell** told me you'd be interested in seeing a recent beach find," wrote **Paula Berntson**, Brevard County Natural Resources Management Office. "This is the remains of a rocket motor that was removed from the beach last week by Keep Brevard Beautiful (July 2007). The Air Force determined it was no longer a hazard and did not contain any rocket fuel residue. **Blair and Dawn Witherington's** book "Florida's Living Beaches" has a picture of a similar rocket motor (page 290)."

"I've asked my contact at the Air Force for more info but they have no way to know what rocket the motor is from or how old it is. According to the Witherington's book: "The expended graphite-epoxy motor (what we think it is), or GEM, is a solid fuel booster that falls from the sky after helping to launch Boeing Delta II and IV rockets, as well as Lockheed Martin's Atlas 5. GEM's helped launch most of the GPS [Global Positioning System] satellites used by hurricane-measuring drop sondes. The GEM boosters formerly contained grains of rubber or aluminum mixed with an oxidizer such as ammonium perchlorate."



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Curtis Ebbesmeyer

Dr. Curtis C. Ebbesmeyer is a professional oceanographer with a passion for all things afloat on the world's oceans. **Report flotsam to him in Seattle or [curtisebbesmeyer@comcast.net](mailto:curtisebbesmeyer@comcast.net).** Antiviral software automatically quarantines contaminated messages. Be sure to include your name (as you would like it printed in the *Alert*) and email plus postal addresses. Include written accounts with photographs of yourself with drifters. Please send news clippings concerning drifting objects. Catalog debris on your beach. Long-term observations are key to documenting ocean pollution. Recycle this *Alert* by giving to a friend, posting on a bulletin board or donating to a library.

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*“May the tides be good to you.”*

— Paul J. Ebbesmeyer

## 2008 - 2009 BEACHCOMBER FAIRS

**October 17 - 18, 2008 (Friday-Saturday):** *Annual Sea Bean Symposium and Beachcombers' Fair*, Cocoa Beach Public Library (seabean.com).

**March 7 - 8, 2009 (Saturday-Sunday):** *Beachcombers' Fun Fair*, Ocean Shores, Washington, Ocean Shores Convention Center (oceanshores.com).

**March 21 - 22, 2009 (Saturday-Sunday):** *Annual Driftwood Show*, Grayland, Washington, Grayland Community Hall (cranberrycoastcoc.com).



Watch for (April 2009)

### *Floatsametrics and the Floating World*

By Curtis Ebbesmeyer and Eric Scigliano  
*Smithsonian Books / HarperCollins*

*How one man's obsession with runaway sneakers and rubber ducks REVOLUTIONIZED OCEAN SCIENCE*

