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## Surf City invasion Venomous men-of-war line beach

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**SURF CITY** | Hundreds of highly venomous Portuguese men-of-war washed ashore, blanketing the beach for miles Monday and mystifying officials and experts.

The number of iridescent, purple balloon-like creatures baffled residents who aren't used to seeing so many of them at one time.

"We usually see hundreds of dead fish washed up on the shore for miles, but never man o' wars" said Officer D. Blanton, the Surf City policeman who responded to a call about the men-of-war on the beach.

"We get our fair share of them in the summer, but we've never had this many," Blanton said.

The man-of-war is so named because its air bladder - when inflated - looks like the sail of the 16th century man-of-war naval vessels, the precursor to galleons.

Unlike most marine animals, the man-of-war isn't self-propelled, relying on the wind and currents to move it though the ocean.

Although more commonly found in tropical or sub-tropical waters, the Gulf Stream sometimes carries them to the waters of Southeastern North Carolina, said Peggy Sloan, education curator with the N.C. Aquarium at Fort Fisher.

But usually they stay offshore and are only rarely blown onto local beaches - and then only in individual or small numbers, not in large blooms, said Dave Baker, head of Wrightsville Beach's Ocean Rescue.



STAFF PHOTO | GARETH MCGRATH

**Hundreds of Portuguese men-of-war line the beach for miles Monday in Surf City. Experts warned people not to touch the venomous creatures, which can sting even when dead.**

"I've never heard of them in those numbers around here," said Baker, who worked on the Outer Banks before Wrightsville Beach.

He added that he hadn't heard of any jellyfish-like critters washing ashore Monday at Wrightsville.

Richard Satterlie, Frank Hawkins

Kenan Distinguished Professor of Marine Biology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, said the timing of the men-of-war washing onto the beach also is confusing.

"From what I understand, the man-of-war does occasionally wash up onto shore, but it's during the spring and summer seasons," he said. Warmer weather, which causes the creatures to bloom, and the wind might have contributed to their unexpected appearance, Satterlie said.

The man-of-war moves at the mercy of the wind and tide, and when the winds blow in from the southeast, the species may wash ashore, said Bill McLellan, a UNCW research assistant and the state's marine mammal stranding coordinator.

"I don't know for sure but an eddy may have come up off the Gulf Stream and caused them to end up on the beach," he said.

But whatever the cause, Satterlie said people should not touch a man-of-war even if it is dead.

"They are possibly the one most venomous marine creatures and even a dead one can still sting," he said. "By touching some of the cells in the tentacles, it can still trigger them to sting."

Blanton said police have had no reports of anyone being stung by the creatures.

"We're not too concerned," he said. "It's a part of nature. They'll wash back out to sea or the birds will continue to eat them."

*Gareth McGrath contributed to this story.*