

SOUTH SWELL

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SEA HUNT

Gathering Fish for the Aquarium

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Gathering the fish and invertebrates that live in the five aquariums and tide pool in Doheny's Visitor Center can be a daunting task. I was fortunate enough to get to participate in collecting animals last August.

Long-time DSBIA board member Kenny Neilsen invited Jim Serpa and me aboard his work boat the *Early Bird II* for a collection trip. Kenny's business, called Seaventures, is a marine and environmental service company that does ocean bottom surveys for a variety of clients. The *Early Bird II* is a workboat, so the stern or back end is equipped with a hoist that was attached to a net called an otter-trawl. Designed to catch bottom dwelling fish, the otter-trawl net is constructed so that when correctly launched it will take the shape of a huge funnel while traveling along the ocean bottom.



Captain Kenny



Hearty Crew Aboard Early Bird II

Being the green crew member that I was, I had to learn that the way the net is launched determines if it will work effectively. The mouth of the net is held open by two large "doors" which are attached to either side of the net. The "doors" are made of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch plywood, and they have to be launched together and exactly at the same time. Being the workboat that it is, the *Early Bird II* has no railing at the stern, so I quickly had to learn how to launch the net along with the doors while avoiding the moving steel cable of the hoist all the while keeping from launching myself into the ocean.

Kenny's crew member Bob worked the hoist while he gave commands to Jim and me. I found that I had to work fast while keeping track of what I could grab if I slipped. I have a new respect for the crew members of the *America's Deadliest Catch* reality television show.

Before venturing into the open ocean, we did a practice run while we were still in Dana Point Harbor. We successfully brought our first catch aboard, and we found fish. The most interesting fish in this catch was a plainfin midshipman, *Porichthus notatus*, which are an ugly-looking fish. The interesting thing



about this fish is that it has photophores which are arranged in a ‘U’ shape on the underside of the mouth end. At night, these photophores light up to attract a mate. I’m told that the female swallows the male during mating. Adults breathe air when out of the water, and they are an important prey item for our local seals and sea lions. We kept this fish for display in the aquariums.

Our first trawl also brought up large quantities of drift kelp – both southern sea palm and *macrocyctosis*. With a wet deck and algae to slip on, the job of deckhand suddenly became much more difficult. We headed south, and we dropped the net just off-shore of the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant. The net came up with so many fish the hoist had to be use to lift it.

The net was full of hundreds of tiny silver fish I’ve never seen before. I pride myself on knowing all the species of fish that live in the near-shore waters of Southern California, and I quickly learned these fish are called Pacific moonfish, *Vomer declivifrons*. They are small ranging in size from a little larger than my thumbnail to about six inches. There were hundreds of them, and we quickly had to throw them back in. We were lucky to have Kenny’s grandsons aboard who made quick work of this job. These fish are fragile, so they don’t make it alive to Doheny’s aquariums which is why they are not on display.



One of the more interesting fish in this haul was a California butterfly ray, *Gymnura marmorata*, which has an extremely broad shape giving the ray the outline of a butterfly. This ray is on display, so be sure to look for it the next time you visit.



We made several more hauls, and we found a variety of crabs, shrimp, several species of perch, and some small kelp bass. All of these fish live in their new home in the aquariums.

I’m lucky to have had this opportunity to gather marine life for Doheny’s Aquarium. I enjoyed the experience of being part of the crew on a research vessel for a couple of hours as well as not slipping off the back end of the *Early Bird II*. A big thank you to Kenny for keeping Doheny’s aquariums stocked with a variety of marine life for visitors to see.



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