

## **Tourists or Weather Forecasters**

### **Ranger Jim Serpa**

Have you ever heard this snide remark from your non-Southern Californian friends or relatives? “We don’t like Southern California because it doesn’t have any weather.” Aha, I think, they just aren’t paying attention. While I agree we don’t have the drastic changes you see in New England or, for that matter, Northern California, we do have some noticeable differences, especially this year.

Just in case you haven’t been paying attention to our beaches this year, we have had some strange visitors and these visitors don’t have out-of-state license plates. These “tourists” have washed ashore in huge numbers and go by the names of *By-the-Wind Sailor* and the *Pelagic or Tuna Crab*. One is a purplish-blue sea jelly while the other looks like a miniature red lobster. The really cool thing about their appearance is they normally seem to show their faces only during El Nino years.

If you ask the scientists if we are in for another El Nino winter, you will get mixed responses, depending on whom you ask and even when you ask. They have flip-flopped on the issue more than a flapjack cook at a Sunday morning pancake breakfast! Maybe yes, maybe no. But the fact remains that in many previous El Nino years we have seen one or both of these species show up on our beaches preceding the infamous event. Now that’s not to say it’s

going to happen, but if it does just remember where you heard it.

The ***By-the-Wind Sailor*** is a small -- two to four inches -- oval jellyfish-like animal more closely related to the hydroid. It was once thought to be closely related to the



***Portuguese Man-of-War*** but more recent studies have proved otherwise. It has very short tentacles and a distinct sail-like appendage that sits atop the animal. The ***By-the-***

***Wind Sailor*** uses the wind to propel it through the seas. Needless to say it is at the mercy of the wind and currents because of this adaptation. For shell collectors, keep a wary eye out for the purple snail, ***Janthina***, which spends its life floating at the surface on a raft of bubbles looking for ***By-the-Wind Sailors*** to devour. I found a couple of shells in La Jolla back in 1983, and guess what; it was an El Nino winter that year.

The second visitor is the cranky ***Pelagic Red Crab***. It gets its nickname, ***Tuna Crab***, from the tuna's preference to dine on them. For that matter who



doesn't dine on them? From gulls to squid to whales, everyone seems to enjoy feasting on these guys. This feisty little crustacean grows to about 3 or 4 inches and has two claws it uses to feed (and pinch unsuspecting divers). Recently, Aquarium Park Aide Brian Lane and I walked the beach sifting through thousands of dead *Pelagic Red Crabs* until we found 40 or so lively ones to bring back to the Doheny Aquariums. As soon as we dumped some into the aquariums there was a feeding frenzy the likes of which you don't see unless you watch those cheesy "Jaws" rip-offs. Fish we hadn't seen move much for days at a time were beside themselves with glee as they dined on that night's entrée of *Tuna Crabs*. We still have one or two hiding in the Moray tank. The challenge is spotting them.

Next time your friends brag about their autumn colors, tell them you saw some *Tuna Crabs*, *Purple Snails* and *By-the-Wind Sailors* last week and that your long range forecast may call for rain. And don't forget to mention our property values. Ouch!

PS. Just recently we have had some new "*visitors*" in the form of *jumbo flying squid* to our waters....be on the look out!