

Billions of Blue Jellyfish Wash

Up on California Beaches

The animals known as "by-the-wind sailors" stay out on the open ocean until the winds change.

In recent weeks, about a billion jellyfish-like "purple sailors" have washed up on west coast beaches of the United States. The animals, known as "by-the-wind sailors" or *Velella Velella*, are found on the shore and pile up like a carpet of deflated blue and purple balloons.

The jellies started washing up on Oregon and Washington State beaches five to six weeks ago, says Kevin Rask, a marine biologist at Monterey Peninsula College in central California. Then they started showing up in California.

The animals usually float on the surface in the open ocean, riding wind and water currents in search of food using a hardened, triangular "sail." But in years when the wind changes direction, they are pushed towards shore and almost certain death.

The mass strandings aren't unusual, Rask says. They happen about every three to six years.

Rask estimates that as many as a billion *Velella* have piled up on beaches along the west coast. But no matter how pretty they are, the biologist says their dried out sails look like transparent Pringles and people shouldn't collect them. It's against California law to collect marine life without the proper permits.

Since these animals are related to jellyfish, they can also sting. *Velella* are predators and

hunt microscopic plankton on the ocean's surface.

If you touch them, you might not feel any pain in your fingers, Rask says. But if you rub your eyes or touch a more sensitive part of your skin, you're going to feel it. In other words, the rule is: don't touch.

By John Donaldson 8KB

