

The Bane of the Beach Returns

But Bluebottles Are More Than Their Sting

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If you are walking along the beach remember to look down - the tides have washed in the first bluebottles of the season.

These stinging pieces of floatsam may look like jellyfish but they are in fact a different type of animal altogether.

Bluebottles (also known as the Portuguese man o' war) are a collection of individual animals known as zooids. Each zooid is a genetic clone of its neighbour, but different zooids perform different tasks like floating, feeding, reproducing or - infamously - stinging.

Their population booms in spring as the warming waters and increasing sunlight feeds more plankton, boosting their supply of food.

The name Portuguese man o' war comes from a 15th century warship which expertly harnessed the wind, something the bluebottles do with their own 'sail' that is filled with oxygen, nitrogen, carbon monoxide and argon. A fleet of bluebottles sailed past Foxton Beach in the summer of 2024 which lifeguards described as a large blue mat floating out at sea.

But the resemblance to a warship does not end there, as bluebottles are well armed. Tiny capsules called nematocysts (11 billionths of a meter in size) hold coils of venom which spring out to sting whatever they touch. It has been suggested that the sting may activate in one millionth of a second, and eject at 60 kilometers an hour, but research is still ongoing.

What we do know is that being stung by a bluebottle is nothing personal - the stings are automatic and even work after the animal has died.

So, what do you do if you get stung? Don't panic, get to an area where you can



Bluebottles on Foxton Beach. Photo Credit: Armin Litterk via iNaturalist.

rest (if you are stung on the foot as moving around spreads the sting). Don't scratch the area, instead gently wash it with sea water and gently remove the stingers with a dry towel (wearing gloves if possible).

A hot water bath may relieve the pain. Over the counter pain killers are also recommended.

If it still hurts, you were stung in a sensi-

tive area like the eyes or mouth, or the pain is spreading seek medical attention. If you are in any doubt, call Healthline on 0800 611 116 or dial 111 in an emergency. However, most stings clear up on their own.

But if it is any consolation, bluebottles have their enemies too. The blanket octopus, a species of which is found around New Zealand, is immune to the bluebottle

stings - and it knows it. The octopus will rip a stinging tentacle off the bluebottle and use it as a whip against predators.

You might even feel sorry for the beached bluebottles, caught between the sun and sand, and the ocean's predator waiting offshore.

At least, you'll feel sorry until you step on one.