Padre Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Padre Island National Seashore

Sea Jellies and Jelly-like Organisms

Most people cringe when they think of jelly sh oating through the ocean or laying on the beach. In fact, the painful sting that is caused by some jelly sh has made us overlook and forget about the other features that make these animals so beautiful, unique, and interesting. You can often visit the National Seashore and view shorebirds and other wildlife munching away at jelly sh that have washed ashore. Jelly sh serve as an important part of the food web and many animals, including birds and turtles, consider jelly sh to be a tasty treat.

Jelly sh are related to other creatures, such as sea anemones, corals, and hydroids. All of these creatures use stinging cells for feeding and defense. With no brain to guide their actions, jelly sh must depend upon the currents to carry them where food may be. Spring and summer winds and currents cause many unfortunate jelly sh to wash ashore at the National Seashore.

Photo courtesy of Tracy Parris

What do I do if I get stung by a jelly sh?

Many of the jellies that are found in the Laguna Madre or Gulf of Mexico have stinging cells that are too weak to a ect humans. Even though animals like the Portuguese man-of-war or sea nettles can have quite a painful sting, there is seldom a need for serious medical concern unless the person stung has other allergies, such as bee stings or ant bites. If you are stung, apply salt water, not fresh water. Applying fresh water will cause the stinging cells to become agitated, causing further pain. You can seek medical attention at the Malaquite Visitor Center or apply vinegar to the irritated area.

Portuguese Man-of-War

The Portuguese man-of-war is sometimes referred to as the “blue jelly sh,” but it is actually not a true jelly. Instead, it is a colony of four di erent types of animals that work together as a single unit. Each type of animal forms a di erent part of the body: the hunting tentacles, the digestive tentacles, the oat, and the reproductive organs. The amount of gas within the oat can be regulated, allowing this jelly sh-like creature to move up and down in the water column. Portuguese man-of-war have an extremely painful sting. If you see many of them washed on the beach, you may want to stay out of the water to avoid being stung. Suspended beneath the oat are long tentacles with stinging cells used for capturing small sh that wander accidentally into the drifting death trap.

By-the-Wind Sailor

Only a couple of inches in length, the By-the-wind sailor is actually a colony of many individual polyps supported by a plastic-like disc and sail. With a series of sealed air chambers, the disc is used to help this jelly oat. The sail is positioned across the top, allowing it to catch the wind and drift along. Hanging from the oating disk are reproductive tentacles and a single feeding tentacle. The edge of the disk is fringed with stinging tentacles, which catch shrimp larvae and other types of zooplankton, but have little to no e ect on people.

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Cabbagehead Jelly sh

The Cabbagehead jelly sh exclusively feeds on plankton. Its distinctive feature is the deep, dense, milky-colored bell. Unlike the Moon jelly, the Cabbagehead jelly's bell lacks long tentacles, but has oral arms that extend a short distance below the bell. A very limited number of stinging cells are located on the oral arms, causing little more than a mild tingle if touched by a human.

Blue Button

Like the Portuguese man-of-war and By-the-wind sailor, the Blue button is a colony of organisms that drift at the mercy of the wind and currents. It is most often a rich blue on top with tentacles that vary in color from blue to a bright green. Sometimes the top is a golden-brown color. The Blue button has a at, circular gas- lled chamber, which acts as a oat. It is surrounded by blue-green tentacles that are not strong enough to harm humans. The tentacles are actually individual zooids, organic cells that can move independently within a living organism. Each zooid has a specialized function: some digest, others capture prey, and some zooids are specialized for reproduction.

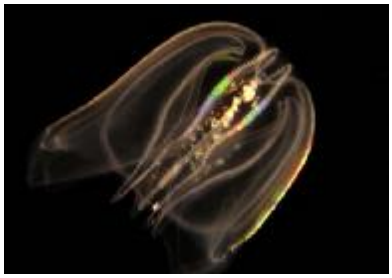
Moon Jelly

Moon jellies are clear, fragile, beautiful swimmers. They propel themselves through the water by moving their bell in a waving motion. Four horseshoe-shaped markings in the center of its bell are its distinguishing characteristics. Four short feeding arms extend downward from the underside of the bell, acting as shing lines that catch zooplankton, small, free- oating, marine animals. Although Moon jellies are relatively harmless, skin irritations can result if the animals are handled. Found worldwide, Moon jellies are also fairly common in the Laguna Madre during the summer.

Sea Nettle

Like the land plant which shares its name, the Sea nettle packs a powerful sting. Several long tentacles dangle from the edge of its bell. Four long oral arms are suspended from the center of the bell. Small triangles radiate outward from the center of the upper surface of the bell's edge. The color of these triangles and tentacles varies from nearly clear to pink or rust. Sea nettles are common during the summer in the Laguna Madre and may occasionally be found on the Gulf shore. Unlike many other jelly sh that eat sh or plankton, Sea nettles eat their distant kin, known as Comb jellies (shown below).

Comb Jelly



Comb jellies, lacking stinging cells and having a complex digestive system, are not true jellies. They derive their name from the eight comb-like structures which propel the animals through the water. These "combs" are illuminated by special cells that cause these jellies to glow in the dark. In the summer, many comb jellies migrate to the Laguna Madre in search of larval shrimp and oysters.