

Velella velella

Usually in spring, but occasionally in winter, great windrows of blue- to purple-bodied jellyfish line our beaches. The scientific name of the jellyfish is *Velella velella*.

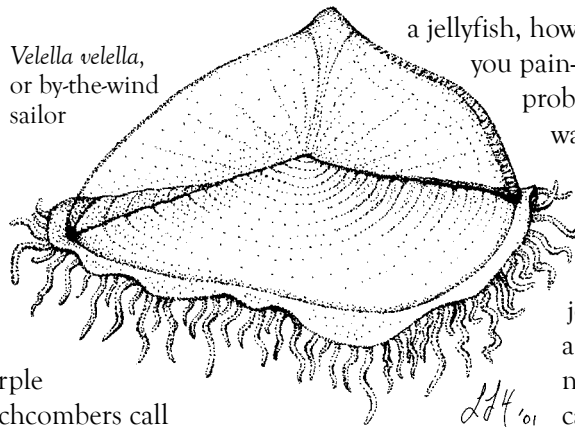
A good common name is “by-the-wind sailors,” or you might prefer the shorter “purple sailor.” Some Northwest beachcombers call them “Portuguese man-of-war,” but this is incorrect; the man-of-war lives only in warm waters.

Velella is an offshore resident. Winds blowing gently against its triangular, clear sail move the jellyfish. The sail is set diagonally to the long axis of the animal. On our side of the north Pacific Ocean, their sails are set in a northwest to southeast direction. On the other side of the north Pacific, the sails are set in a northeast to southwest direction. In the southern hemisphere, sails are reversed. As long as the winds blow gently, *Velella* tacks at about 45° away from a following wind. This keeps the animal offshore.

When winds are strong, *Velella* loses its tacking ability and begins spinning and more directly follows the wind. Strong westerlies, then, are what drive these animals onto our beaches.

All jellyfish have stinging cells in their tentacles. Most people are not bothered by touching one from our beaches with their hands. You should not rub your eyes or put a finger in your mouth after handling

Velella velella, or by-the-wind sailor



a jellyfish, however, because this could cause you pain—and maybe even more serious problems. You should also avoid walking barefoot through freshly beached jellyfish.

Velella is not the only jellyfish you might find on your beach walks. The water jelly, *Aequorea*, usually appears as a flat, clear blob with distinct and numerous rib-like radial canals. It can be spotted in the water at night as a bright, pulsing ball of light caused by its own bioluminescence. West coast sea nettle (*Chrysaora fuscascens*) is tan with reddish-orange hues and has very long tentacles. Its sting can be mildly harmful to humans, about as potent as a bee sting.



A water jelly, *Aequorea*, in a child's hand



West coast sea nettle, *Chrysaora fuscascens*

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