

Man-of-wars inundate Harwich beaches, #2-1856

By Douglas Karlson/ dkarlson@cnc.com

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Harwich beaches are awash in Portuguese man-of-wars, but so far, no one has reported being stung by the creatures.

According to Jeff Carter, director of Harwich's recreation and youth department, between 40 and 50 of the animals were removed from public beaches Wednesday. Eleven were removed from Red River Beach on Thursday morning.

If you happen upon one, don't touch it, advises Carter. On public beaches, notify a lifeguard, or call the recreation and youth department or highway department. If removing it yourself, use a shovel, he advises.

It's better to remove them than to bury them, said Harwich Harbormaster Tom Leach. That's because the nematocysts, the stingers on the tentacles, can still sting for days after the man-of-war dies.

Parents should caution children, said Carter. "They're kind of cool looking," he said of the animals. "My biggest fear is a little kid touching [one]."

Also known as a "blue bottle," the Portuguese man-of-war has an air bladder, known also as a sail, that allows it to float on the surface of the ocean. It has no means of propulsion and is pushed by the winds and the current. Its tentacles have been reported as long as 180 feet.

Harwich beaches were last deluged with man-of-wars in the 1980s, said Leach.

Carter said the high numbers might be due to the wind and a moon tide Wednesday night, which produced high water and brought in large amounts of seaweed. The man-of-wars get caught up in the seaweed and accumulate on the beach, he said.

If large numbers of man-of-wars were discovered in swimming areas, Carter said closing beaches to swimming would be an option.