

Man-of-Wars close beaches

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OK, it's not "Jaws," but it's still inspiring fear and keeping people out of the water on a holiday weekend.

Yesterday, the slow, drifting invasion of Portuguese man-of-wars closed four beaches on Nantucket.

"It's a little similar to shark sightings," said Alice McWade, office administrator of the Nantucket Park and Recreation Commission.

McWade confirmed that Miacomet, Madaket, Surfside and Cisco beaches - all along Nantucket's south shore - were closed for at least part of the day yesterday after numerous reports of the jellyfish-like stinging blobs.

"Don't make it a big to-do," said assistant Nantucket Harbor Master Kenneth Lappin. "It's not a plague. We don't see any extended area - we haven't got two miles or four miles of man-of-wars out there. We've just got a few jellyfish."

However, Lappin, who has spent approximately 35 summers on the island, said he couldn't recall a previous Nantucket beach-closing due to the beasts.

Portuguese man-of-wars have been seen in area waters over the past few days, and in several cases, painfully encountered. On Sunday at least eight people sought assistance after being stung while in the water in Falmouth. Earlier in the weekend, five people at a Chilmark beach were stung. Beaches were temporarily closed in both towns.

On June 26, Philip Beauregard of Westport reported that he was repeatedly stung by two man-of-wars off Westport's East Beach. Beauregard said the stings caused severe pain and led to an overnight hospital stay.

The sting of a Portuguese man-of-war is painful but rarely life-threatening, although it can cause shock in some people.

Storms and warm currents can send the man-of-wars our way, though they are more typically seen in warmer climes.

In a recent interview with the Times, Erich Horgan, a research associate in the biology department at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, expressed some surprise at the man-of-wars' early arrival in our region, but said they weren't rare in Cape waters and would likely be in the vicinity for much of the summer.

And, for scorekeeping purposes, Portuguese man-of-wars, though wiggly, are not jellyfish. And

a man-of-war is not a single animal, but a colony of interdependent organisms, packed into a gas-filled top float that resembles a warship of yore. The tentacles can hang down 100 feet or more, in order to ensnare and digest small fish and other delicacies.

Don't get too close to a washed-up man-of-war on the beach, either. The darn thing can still sting, even when dead.

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