

Jellies cause 'ows' up and down beach

By John Richardson
Nacurra Press

The purple flag has flown along Navarre Beach most of the summer, warning visitors of hazardous marine life. But it's not sharks that are keeping people out of the water.

It's a small, gelatinous creature that packs a nasty sting: jellies.

Parents have been keeping their children out of the water all summer. The Celaya family, who traveled to Navarre from Eagle Mountain, Utah, spent most of their beach time in Santa Rosa Sound.

Jonathan Celaya showed off a red welt on his stomach, caused by a jelly sting the family's first day on the beach.

"He did not want to go back in the gulf again," said his mother, Katie Celaya. "We have been to the sound side every day since then."

The lifeguards recommended Jelly Fish Squish, a new product, to the Celayas. They treated Jonathan's sting, and it relieved the burning sensation.

"There were only three bottles left in the store," said his father, Jon Celaya. "I guess with this many jellies out there, the product is selling really well."

The Phillips family, from Nevada, Mo., spent the week trying to dodge the jellies.

"We tried Pensacola Beach one day and Destin another day, hoping there would be less there," Mari Anne Phillips said. "They were as plentiful there as they are on Navarre Beach. In order to avoid the jellies, we went to the zoo, movies and did some shopping on some of our days here. The rest of the week we have spent here on the sound side of the island. We wanted to do some scuba diving, but we will do it in the sound."

Ron Eyal, visiting from Birmingham, has seen enough jellies in the gulf.

"My son, Tom, has been stung in the past and did not want to try his luck again," Eyal said. "I have a younger son, Elhan, who does not want to be in the water with them, either."

The Eyals also set up their beach blankets on the sound for the day.

Katie Sawyer was visiting from New Orleans and had a bad experience early in her stay. "We went out to the gulf on our first day and both my husband and brother were stung," she said. "We used some vinegar and sand to treat the stings. We are doing activities on the sound to get away from the jellies. We plan to jet ski and some parasailing on the sound during some of our remaining days here in Navarre."

Each morning Terry Wallace, supervisor of the Navarre Beach water department, patrols the beach while most residents and visitors are having their first cup of coffee. He determines which surf condition flag to fly. For the entire month of July, he saw enough jellies to also warrant the flying of the purple flag, which denotes dangerous sea life.

Wendy Bear, an assistant regional biologist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, said there are many reasons for the increased amount of jellies in the Gulf this year.

"Changes in water temperature or increased presence of their food source are both considerations," Bear said. "Jellies are also known to be more present during stormy weather or in El Nino and La Nina years. In warmer water, certain sea life seems to reproduce more and therefore have an increased presence than other times of the year when the water is cooler."

The two most common types of jellies seen in the gulf this year are the cannonball and moon jellies. According to the Web site www.beachhunters.net, jellies have tentacles that hang down from their body. The tentacles have stinging cells called nematocysts, which contain venom. When the tentacles touch something, the nematocysts build up pressure and burst, driving little harpoons filled with venom into whatever was unlucky enough to touch the jelly.

The cannonball jelly is about six inches in diameter and may contain a blue or yellow color with a brown border. It gives off a mild sting.

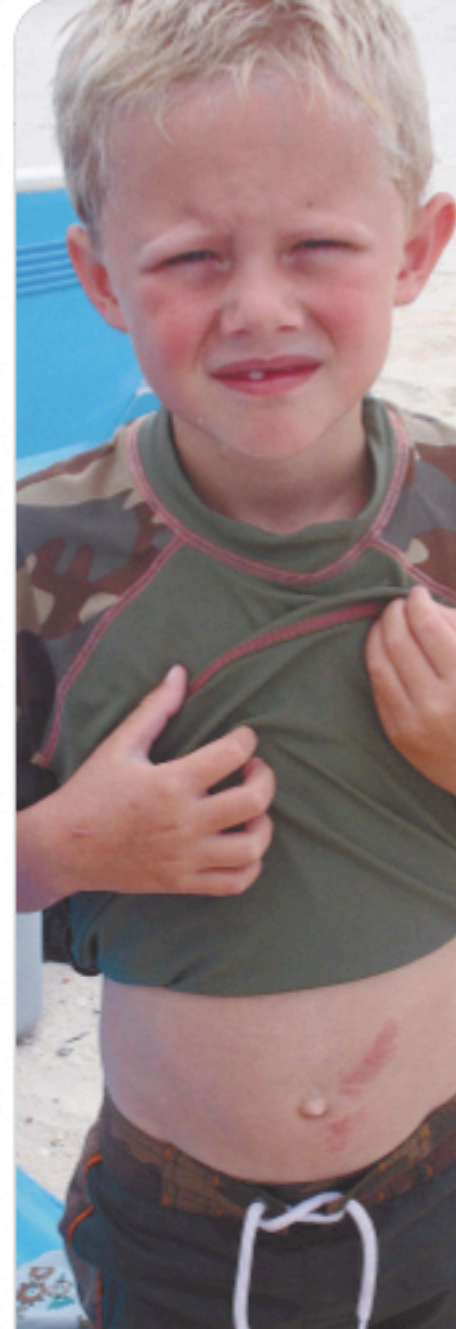
The moon jelly is about seven inches in diameter and is clear except for a little purple color. Moon jellies are known to congregate in large numbers along the gulf. Their sting can be quite painful and usually lasts about an hour, the Web site said.



Cannonball jelly



Moon jelly



Photos by John Richardson
Jonathan Celaya shows off his jellyfish sting



Katie and Thomas Sawyer enjoy "mom's beach," which is located along the sound, away from the threat of jellyfish.