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Sting

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Sting!

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Photo: Tessa Getchis

Pretty Poison: The Lion's Mane Jelly, which usually visits Long Island Sound shores in late summer, is lovely to look at but packs a prickly sting. There's not a mean bone, or any bone, in its body–it's mostly water.

Yow! Burning and itching from a close encounter with a stinging jellyfish isn't likely to be anybody's favorite beach memory. And late summer heralds the arrival of just such an unwelcome visitor to the shores of Long Island Sound, the Lion's Mane Jellyfish. (Well, just to make the point that it's bad to generalize, this year they showed up early and surprised some Sound swimmers in July.) But before you think unkindly of this sea creature, realize that it is only trying to get a meal, and protect itself.

Really. The nematocysts, or stinging cells of a jelly contain tiny harpoon-like structures armed with a toxin to paralyze prey or predator on contact. It's a very effective natural weapon; maybe that's why jellies have been around for more than 650 million years. They don't purposely attack unwary swimmers or shore walkers, but when you collide with one carried by the tide or current, or pick one up from the beach, you can expect a response.

"Jellies" has become a more popular term than the traditional "jellyfish" reflecting the fact that they are not fish by any stretch of imagination, but rather soft-bodied invertebrates that biologists call cnidarians. Amazingly, 95 to 99 per cent of a jelly's body is simply water.

The Lion's Mane jelly, also known as the Pink Jellyfish or Red Jellyfish, comes to Long Island Sound's shores with the warm temperatures, and vanishes offshore with the cool winds of fall, to die. These beautifully symmetrical animals, *Cyanea capitella* to scientists, are usually less than a foot in diameter in the Sound. They can grow much bigger in other parts of the world–up to eight feet in the Arctic. They are easy to distinguish from their less colorful and more benign relatives, moon jellies (*Aurelia*), by two distinct features: the pinkish-red color of the "umbrella" (medusa), and by the many long, trailing tentacles underneath.

As for the mildly painful sting, experts say the best way to treat one is to wash the area with seawater (not fresh water), then apply either vinegar or meat tenderizer. The severity varies with individuals and number of stings but most people will quickly recover. If welts occur, some Benadryl® may be in order. As always, any severe reaction such as difficulty breathing, could mean an extreme allergic reaction, which requires immediate medical attention.

Don't let the presence of some really rather lovely but prickly jellies deter you from the beach!

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