

Fellow Travellers ... Neil Tucker, Rebecca Hosking

Did you go walking on a beach early in December? If you had, you would have noticed millions of By-the-Wind Sailors, *Verella verella*, washed up at the high tide mark. Scattered amongst them were some bleached Bluebottles, *Physalia physalis*, and some Violet Sea Snails, *Janthina janthina*, thinly-shelled and still with goose barnacles attached. Violet Sea Snails are unusual visitors to the Surf Coast but they travel with the Bluebottles and By the Wind Sailors, as they are their food source.



Violet Sea Snail

The Violet Sea Snail or Common Violet Snail is a species of sea snail which is found worldwide in the warm waters of tropical and temperate seas, floating at the surface. They are often found in large groups and sometimes become stranded on beaches when they are blown ashore by strong winds.

These snails are unique organisms, living on or at the very surface of the water, drifting far out in the open ocean, where they feed upon pelagic hydrozoans, especially the

Verella verella, and the *Physalia physalis*.

Janthina janthina is a member of the Janthinidae family, snails that trap air bubbles with a layer of clear chitin to maintain their positions at the surface of the ocean. In addition to the bubble raft, the shell is paper-thin to allow the animal to float upside down at the surface. The snail's shell is reverse counter shaded, because of its upside-down position in the water column. There is a light purple shade on the spire of the shell, and a darker purple on the ventral side. The animal has a large head on a very flexible neck. The eyes are small and are situated at the base of its tentacles. The height of the shell is up to 38 mm, the width to 40 mm. The snail begins life as a male and later changes to female. The eggs are held by the female until they develop into a larval form.



Bluebottle

The By-the-Wind Sailors are interesting in their own right.

There is only one species in the genus. Most marine scientists believe they are not a single creature, but a colony. Some of the component organisms capture food and protect the colony, some ingest food, and some are involved in reproduction. These are all suspended below the winged raft. The direction of the wing's angle determines the direction the creature sails relative to the wind, and is different depending on which part of the world *Verella* occurs, possibly to avoid the whole population becoming stranded in one storm event, i.e. some will sail towards the coast and some away. Like the Portuguese man-o-wars, to which they are related, they have stinging tentacles, but these are very short & of little risk to humans.



Photo by Rebecca Hosking

By-the-Wind Sailor

Surprisingly, none of these species had been recorded for the Surf Coast, so we have added them to the *Atlas of Living Australia*.

Ref: Edgar, G, 1997. *Australian Marine Life* Reed Books
Wikipedia

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