

# 'Fire body' creatures habitate local beaches

## They came from beneath the seas

By Katie Frankowicz  
EO Media Group

A strange organism has taken over the ocean waters off Oregon this spring, clogging fishing and research gear and confounding beachcombers and biologists.

Fishermen compare them to pickles, gummy bears and sea cucumbers. They are the Borg of the ocean, one researcher suggested, referencing characters from the "Star Trek" TV show. They look like "Star Wars" creatures, a biologist said.

They are called pyrosomes, and they are everywhere.

In all his decades doing survey and research work off the coast, Richard Brodeur, research fishery biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, has never encountered pyrosomes in these kinds of numbers, or really at all. He knew about them, had seen them down in California, but never off the Oregon Coast.

Then, "starting in 2014, we started seeing a few of them," he said. In 2015 and 2016, he saw a few more. This spring, on a survey cruise, they pulled up 60,000 pyrosomes in a five-minute tow.



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**Pyrosomes can be massive. Some can glow.**

"This year," Brodeur said, "we must be setting all sorts of records."

### 'All you see'

Sam Zeman, an Oregon State University research associate, said as the survey boats went farther away from shore, they saw bigger and bigger pyrosomes, some roughly 2 feet long.

One researcher fixed a GoPro camera to a net and dropped it over the side. It was a glimpse into a familiar world that had become very

odd. They saw pyrosomes down to a depth of 100 meters, as far as their equipment could go.

"Watching that footage was eerie," said Jennifer Fisher, a research assistant with Oregon State's Cooperative Institute for Marine Resources Studies that work closely with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, who was on a survey cruise in May. There's blue water in all directions, shaded turquoise to dark cerulean, "and all you see is pyrosomes." They seem to hang

in the water, like an army. At night, they drifted near the water's surface. Fisher is pretty sure cockroaches will survive the apocalypse. After this most recent cruise, she added pyrosomes to the list.

"It's very eerie," Zeman said. "There's nothing else. It's just them, and it kind of never stops."

"They could just keep going," Brodeur said. "We have no idea where they end offshore."

### Fire body

Though it looks like a single creature, a pyrosome is made up of individual clones. Hence the Borg reference, though in the case of the pyrosome, the organism is physically linked unlike the TV characters who are mentally connected. A single pyrosome might contain hundreds, if not thousands of individual animals, said Caren Braby, marine resources program manager with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. They don't sting and they can't bite. They are essentially hollow tubes, filter feeders, and very little is known about them.

They are chordates, Braby said, lacking actual vertebrae — bones that form the backbone — but with the beginning of a spinal chord, Braby said. If you were to compare an octopus or a pyrosome to people, "we'd be more closely related to a pyrosome."

Elsewhere, pyrosomes can be

massive and even display bioluminescence. They glow. This is likely how they got the name "pyrosome," a combination of the Greek words "pyro" and "soma": fire body. The organisms off Oregon aren't quite so magical, possibly because they aren't consuming the right bacteria, one researcher theorized.

Salmon trollers from Newport to Alaska reported pyrosomes ending up on the end of their hooks. In fisheries, like the pink shrimp fishery where the gear itself is designed to exclude other fish, pyrosomes are the right size and shape to jam up the works.

Shrimper Steve Davis, who runs several boats out of Warrenton, said the pyrosomes can be so thick on the gear that nothing else can get past them. At the very least, they make it so he's catching less than he should be.

"There's just so many of them, it's hard to pick them out," he said. They range from the size of a pinkie finger to almost a foot long, and they seem to float in packs. If a boat is unlucky enough to hit a patch of them, "you go somewhere else and hope that they're not that thick," Davis said.

To learn more about pyrosomes and watch a video of them in the water visit:  
<http://bit.ly/2sVJqnW>

## New tax to fund affordable housing

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### Affordable Housing Fund

The city's budget committee approved next fiscal year's budget, but not without heated debate over the merits of the newly added Affordable Housing Fund.

The budget was approved 9-1, with the 'no' vote coming Vetter.

Because of the increase in the lodging tax from 7 to 8 percent in 2016, the budget grew 4.7 percent, City Manager Brant Kucera said. The budget includes four major water and wastewater improvement projects, a newly funded position for an in-house building official to evaluate building codes and procedure and additional funding for updated radio technology for police.

But one of the most significant changes to the budget landscape is the Affordable Housing Fund. The fund's purpose in this budget cycle is to build five affordable homes in the RV Resort on Elk Land Road and Haskell Lane, and \$92,000 of that fund is made up from excise tax revenue.

The park was identified as a potential site in a report compiled by the affordable housing task force last year, citing the fact the city owned the land, as well as relatively low startup costs as benefits.

Each house would be around 400 square feet and mobile, Kucera said. With

rent anticipated to be \$600 to \$800 a month, the homes would be intended for single and working-class people who earn about \$15 an hour.

### Different approaches

While the \$429,740 fund has remained in the budget, some members of the committee took issue with the homes relying on a bank loan, rents and construction excise taxes tied to a building economy — all sources of income the committee interpreted as either too risky or unfair to business.

"I don't think it's good for us to charge such a tiny group of people for something that won't make that much money," Vetter said in reference to excise taxes.

During a May budget meeting, Kucera argued that taking out loans to buy a home is standard procedure, and that the plan is low risk given that the city already owns the land and could sell the units if the program does not succeed.

"Maybe there is some assumption of cost," budget committee member Carolyn Propst said, "but if you don't start with a low-risk project then how do you get started?"

But with Kucera leaving as city manager at the end of the month, how this project will roll out isn't set in stone. Tentatively, implementation will be pushed from summer until fall, Kucera said, where it will be under the direction of a new city manager.

## Contest represents hometown tradition



PHOTO BY GEORGE VETTER

**A row of sandcastles at a previous contest.**

Sandcastle from Page 1A

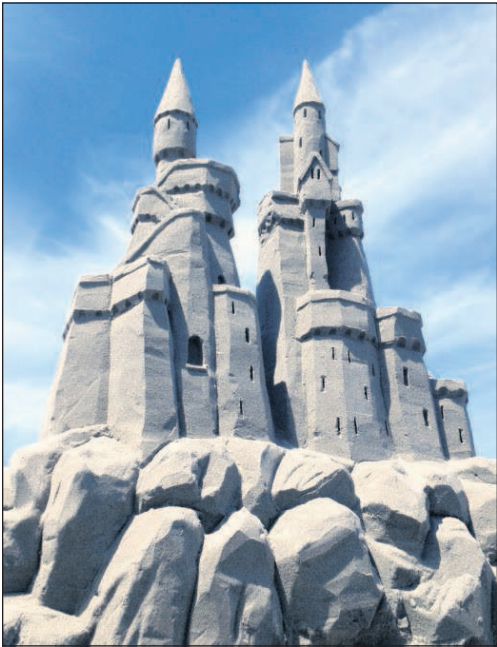
— has served in roles similar to Nelson's over many years. As a judge, participant and event organizer, he said he noticed the cultural vibe ebb and flow. After master artists started taking more interest in the contest in the mid-1990s, he said the level of competition started to rise, taking away some of that iconic family feel.

"I think Debbie's engagement with the town and leadership has helped make it feel like a hometown event again," he said.

For Nelson, that passion comes from a place of protecting the feeling of a hometown tradition.

In her lifetime, she has helped judge, facilitate plots for competitors, and organize the dozens of volunteers it takes to pull off the events.

"I really love the camaraderie of getting the job done. It's such a satisfying moment," she said. "I've lived here all my life. It's a lot of work, but it's a way to represent hometown tradition, and I've decided (the Sandcastle Contest) is the tradition I've decided to put my time into."



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### If you go

**This year's contest will begin 10 a.m. Saturday, June 17. For more information on the contest, contact the Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce at 503-436-2623.**

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