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## Red crab tide: Tuna crabs washing up on Monterey beaches

By Amy McDermott

Monterey County Herald

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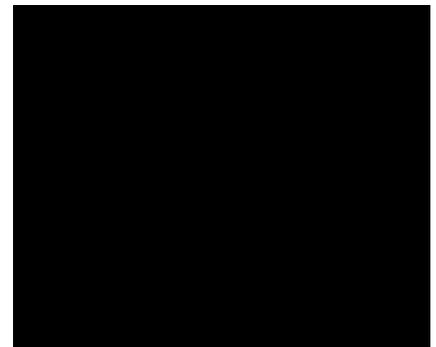
Fernando Montanari shoots a photo of his girlfriend Gabrielle Teixeira, both of Brazil, holding a dead tuna crab that washed up on Asilomar State Beach in Pacific Grove on October 7, 2015. (David Royal - Monterey Herald) ( David Royal )

Pacific Grove - Bright red tuna crabs, or pleuroncodes planipes, are washing up on local beaches.

Spanish Bay and Asilomar are sprinkled with their crimson corpses. The crabs are more common farther south. They've carpeted beaches in San Diego and Orange County this summer, but their last major stranding here was in 1983.

Pebble Beach resident Marie Minarik says she walks along Asilomar State Beach every day, but has never seen the crabs here before.

"Just yesterday was the first time," she said Wednesday, lifting her woven sun hat and pointing toward a handful of the finger-length scarlet crustaceans, tangled in a mass of kelp. "To me they look almost like a cross between a shrimp and a lobster."



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A man walks by dead tuna crabs washed up on Asilomar State Beach in Pacific Grove on October 7, 2015. (David Royal - Monterey Herald) ( David Royal )

Native to Baja and the Gulf of California, red tuna crabs spend their lives drifting en masse in the water column offshore. Generally, Monterey is too cold for them. But during El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events, warm water moves unusually far north, bringing the crabs up with it. ENSO is an irregularly periodical climate change caused by variations in sea surface temperatures over the tropical eastern Pacific Ocean.

"Knowing that El Niño was coming our way, we were just waiting to see if they would make it this far up the coast," said Jim Covell of the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

He cautioned that the red crabs' arrival may not imply anything about the strength of this year's El Niño and associated winter storms. While a mass of warm water was predicted to move up the coast, weather patterns are much harder to anticipate, he says.

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For the ill-fated crustaceans, washing up in Monterey could become commonplace if warm water like the blob, which stretches from California into the Gulf of Alaska, sticks around in the North Pacific.

"With the blob here it may mean red crabs can find comfortable water much further north than Monterey," says Covell.

For now, the crabs are unusual heralds of our winter season. They are completely harmless, although you shouldn't eat them, and provide an important food source to seabirds, fish, dolphins and even whales.

Luckily, they are "probably not the kind of thing to draw sharks or other big predators," Covell said. "It might be kind of fun to actually swim through some masses in the water. If the crabs are there it means the water is warm, so it might be a good time to go swimming."



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Dead tuna crabs sit amongst kelp washed up on Asilomar State Beach in Pacific Grove on October 7, 2015. (David Royal - Monterey Herald) ( David Royal )

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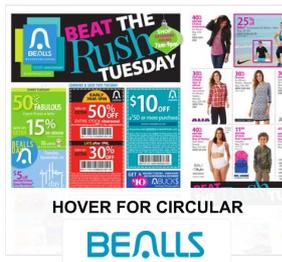
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