



MEDIA RELEASE

Mass Stranding of Woolly Sea Hares at Casuarina Coastal Reserve

A mass stranding of Woolly Sea Hares (*Bursatella leachii*) has been found at Casuarina Coastal Reserve.

Parks and Wildlife Ranger Louise Kean said she noticed the sea creatures while cleaning up the beach the morning after Cracker Night.

"They were jelly-like and about 5 cm long; they looked like hairy sea slugs," Ms Kean said.

"The surface was a light brown colour so they were well-camouflaged on the damp sand amongst the washed up algae.

"It was distinctive because the body became brighter and purple ink oozed from a small gland on the upper surface when the critter was disturbed.

"I found this out after trying to cover one with seaweed to prevent moisture loss."

Suspecting the creatures were "sea hares" Ms Kean contacted Dr Richard Willan, Senior Curator of Molluscs at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT for identification.

Dr Willan confirmed they were what are known as "Woolly Sea Hares" (*Bursatella leachii*).

Washing up at the same time as them is their spawn, which look like tangles of yellow spaghetti in addition to the algae (*Lyngbya majuscula*) they eat.

"As they die, they emit all the repugnatory fluid from their purple gland (which looks like purple ink), so many of them seem rosy pink even though this is not their natural colour," Dr Willan said.

"Naturally they are pale brown with several vivid blue spots on the upper surface.

"While the fluid may stain your fingers the hares are not dangerous or poisonous to humans at all.

"Sea hares have their life cycles geared to that of their algal food; when the algae is abundant, so are the sea hares, and when the algae die and wash ashore, the sea hares do too – it's the molluscan equivalent of a spawning event in salmon.

"Mass strandings like this, whilst common for sea hares around the world, are uncommon in Darwin Harbour, there have only been three in the past 15 years.

"However, they are a natural event in the life cycles of sea hares and not related to pollution in any way".

Anyone who comes across these sea hares is encouraged to contact MAGNT for more information.

Ends

Media Note – For more information contact Louise Kean on 8947 2305 or Dr Richard Willan on 8999 8238

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