

Nature note

I was in the Isles of Scilly on the edge of Hurricane Ophelia when she careered in violently from the Atlantic on 16 October. She was awe-inspiring. The day before had been preternaturally calm – a mild, muggy day with everyone on the islands going about their daily business. The little boats were ferrying tourists about; butterflies were still on the wing, especially speckled woods and red admirals; robins were singing, and even a few song thrushes, which start earlier here because of Scilly's southerly location; and the last agapanthus of autumn were still in flower, along with the first daffodils of next spring.

Then, quite suddenly, the wind freshened, the temperature dropped, and huge waves started building out to sea, white-topped and glittering ominously in a bright, eerie light. Within hours it was blowing a full gale with 75mph winds, massive breakers were pounding the rocks and beaches, and the air was white with whirling spume and spray. I sheltered behind a massive granite slab on the most westerly point of Peninnis Head, both awed and exhilarated by the colossal energy of the natural forces at work. A dramatic reminder of our own puny powers.



Jeremy Mynott

Portuguese Man o' War

Then, again quite quickly, Ophelia swept past, leaving the islands and their inhabitants shaken to

the roots but able to resume their normal lives. The locals had now been joined by some strange new visitors, however. On the west-facing beaches there had been a small invasion by some creatures who had surfed in on the high tide.

They looked quite weird, like pale blue inflated balloons, with a thick tassel of dangling tendrils. Some sort of exotic seaweed? Or ghastly squid cast up from the ocean depths? Or extra-terrestrials? No, they were Portuguese Man o' War, a marine hydrozoan ('water serpent'), closely related to jellyfish. These are ocean wanderers from warm subtropical waters and the inflated bladder (which the Man o' War fills with gases) acts as both a buoyancy device and a sail, taking them wherever the winds blow them. The tendrils are long strings coated with toxic stinging cells – very nasty if you brush into them while swimming, since these are the weapons the Man o' War uses to kill its prey of small fish, which are then dragged into its digestive system. Don't even think about it! They can cause humans very severe rashes, but rarely ever stray into chilly British waters, though that may change with global warming. Despite their repulsive appearance and dangerous habits, however, to see them stranded so pathetically on this distant shore was just another reminder of the vulnerability of all life.

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