

## The Great *Verella* Landing of 2004

By Eileen Flory

“I wouldn’t go down to the beach today if I were you,” warns our neighbor one April day. “There’s a terrible fishy stink down there.” So naturally that’s where we head for our walk. We are about to discover The Great *Verella* Landing of 2004.

*Verella verella*, an animal also known as “by-the-wind sailor,” is similar to the Portuguese man-of-war, only smaller (just an inch or two in length) and purple, with mildly stinging, defensive tentacles hanging down into the water. A gas-filled float keeps it at the surface, and a stiff little “sail” lets it drift with the wind and currents. Its predators in our region include nudibranchs (sea slugs) and big ocean sunfish. Most scientists say each *Verella* is a colony of animals, containing cadres of tiny organisms specializing in, say, structural support, or feeding. But for ordinary folks, *Verella*’s claim to fame is its annual arrival on West Coast beaches in the springtime, when winter’s south winds swing west on their way to summer’s northerlies.

Although the *Verella* invasion signals a welcome change of season, it can be a tragic sight. Like dollops of grape jelly, the little creatures lie inert on the sand, tentacles worn off and sails slumped over, dying by the thousands. Beachcombers fastidiously step around them, dogs roll in them. Soon, each corpse begins to dry into a transparent wisp of a skeleton, tough yet crisp, like a cicada’s discarded skin—all that is left of a once robust, functioning animal.

On our walk this day, we descend the half mile to the shore, and sure enough, the stench hits us hard before we even cross the highway. A broad swath of purple, as far up and down the shore as we can see, greets our eyes once we’re on the beach. This is no ordinary *Verella* landing. This is The Great *Verella* Landing of 2004. We see *Verella* in great, quivering heaps. We see *Verella* in dried sheets that we can peel off and pick up. When we mysteriously slip on the sand and almost fall down, we discover a gelatinous layer of *Verella* buried an inch deep. Finally we’ve had enough and hike home, stunned by the excess.

For weeks afterwards, whenever we drive by the site of the biggest accumulation we gasp from the smell and wonder what it would be like to live in a house right above the beach. Then one day we drive by and realize that the stink is gone, as suddenly as it came.

Two months later, there’s a faint barnyard odor lingering along the beach. Some of the dried skeletons are piled in windrows on rocks at the foot of the sea cliff, and a few are still scattered on the sand. Where have all the rest gone? Can this tough material actually decompose?

It’s somehow comforting to think that the remains of The Great *Verella* Landing of 2004 will be pulverized by sand and water, eventually to become building blocks for the bodies of other, future *Verella*—*Verella* that will sail the open sea and then, one spring day who knows how many years from now, will find themselves washed up on an Oregon beach, where coast dwellers will come down to witness yet another great *Verella* landing.