

FOREWORD

To all except marine biologists, the well-known Portuguese man-o'-war *Physalia* is likely to be regarded as the only British siphonophore. This is doubly unfortunate because *Physalia* is not a regular member of the British fauna and neither is it typical of the Siphonophora in general as it straddles the air/water interface (i.e. is pleustonic). Most of the fragile, beautiful and anatomically complex siphonophores are members of the plankton, seldom seen as complete organisms but nearly always as transparent fragments in plankton samples.

Included in this field-guide along with the 56 species of siphonophores is the only British “chondrophore”, the ‘Jack Sail-by-the-Wind’ (*Velella*)—another member of the pleuston blown occasionally to our shores. Once considered to be related to the siphonophores, it has long been recognised as a somewhat parallel branch of the hydrozoan cnidarians with only a superficial resemblance to the Siphonophora.

These two groups can claim to be morphologically the most complex, specialized and polymorphic of cnidarians. Each colonial siphonophore, for example, may comprise genetically identical but structurally distinct polyps serving feeding, protective and reproductive roles and medusoid ‘individuals’ acting as the ‘organs’ of locomotion and/or buoyancy and as bracts.

We thank the authors of this *Synopsis* for the lucid manner in which they have succeeded in introducing these animals to a wider audience and for the elegance of their illustrations which capture the elusive beauty of the siphonophores.

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