

They came from beneath the sea Just like in 1930: Giant squid invade Bay Area by the millions

Tom Stienstra

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They came from beneath the sea Just like in 1930: Giant squid invade Bay Area by the millions Tom Stienstra Sunday, February 27, 2005 For years as a boy, I'd find myself mesmerized by a page in my favorite wildlife book -- you may remember this yourself -- a drawing of a giant squid wrapping its tentacles around a sperm whale.

Some of my classmates thought this drawing, squid vs. whale at the bottom of the ocean, was a portrayal from the prehistoric days of dinosaurs and T-Rex. But I remember staying up late at night, under the covers with a flashlight with that book, fixated with the drawing, and then reading about the never-ending war between the giant squid and sperm whales that still goes on today.

In the ocean's deepwater trenches, perhaps 2,000 to 5,000 feet deep, sperm whales would attack and eat the giant squid. In turn, the giant squid, some up to 60 feet long, would grab a whale and try to drown it, and if the squid won the fight, be joined by other giant squid and devour the whale. Scientists verified this by measuring the length of the squid tentacle's suction-cup marks that were found on the sides and backs of dead whales that washed up, as well as from the size of the beaks of giant squid that were found in the stomachs of whales.

This childhood memory has taken on a shocking present-day twist with the arrival of another species of giant squid, the Humboldt squid, also called the "jumbo squid," offshore of the Bay Area and along much of the Pacific Coast. They average 15 to 60 pounds and generally measure up to six feet long, but there is a historical record of one that reached 700 pounds. They have not been seen in significant numbers on the Pacific Coast since 1930.

Yet here they are, these giant squid, not hundreds, not thousands, but millions of them. They have roared in from the depths across the Pacific to within 20 miles of Half Moon Bay and Bodega Bay. Many others have been documented near northern Baja, San Diego and even Oregon and Washington.

Voracious predators

Like their 60-foot cousins from the deepwater trenches, they are voracious predators. They have 10 tentacles, including two long tentacles they use to pull their prey in to their razor-sharp beaks.

These tentacles are lined with teeth-lined sucker cups, and with 24 micro teeth in each sucker cup, each squid has some 25,000 teeth. They school in massive hordes and then gang up to swarm in maniacal feeding frenzies. When set off, they will even eat each other, and anything else in their path.



Tom Mattusch

Huli Cat deckhand Jim Ricker, right, and Rich Serini of Oregon show off a giant squid near the mouth of Pioneer Canyon. Photo by Tom Mattusch, special to the Chronicle

They are roaming the canyons aside underwater seamounts off the Bay Area, 400 to 2,000 feet deep, and then can fire up to the surface, swarming around boats by the hundreds. Those aboard gawk in disbelief as the squid swirl and surge in 20-foot blasts from their water jets, changing from the classic white-bleach color to black, red or opaque with a phosphorescent glow. This discovery started on New Year's Day on a scientific research trip out of Bodega Bay run by Rick Powers on the New Sea Angler. Powers had volunteered his boat for a research trip with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to study rockfish reproduction at Cordell Bank.

"I was looking for chilipepper rockfish, so we ran to the deep water at the Bank, 380 to 450 feet of water, and looking at my fishfinder, I saw this little mark on the bottom," Powers said. "We let down and started hooking giant squid."

In the past three weeks, the discovery has turned into a phenomenon.

In 13 trips on the New Sea Angler to Cordell Bank, a total of 640 people (40 per trip) have caught some 9,000 squid, that is, an average of 14 per person. The average squid has been 20 pounds, with the largest, weighing 58 pounds, caught by Pat Martin of Sacramento. Most fishermen are going home with 150 to 200 pounds of 1-inch thick calamari steaks.

Out of Half Moon Bay, Capt. Tom Mattusch had similar success when he made the first exploratory trips on his boat, Huli Cat. His first try, with six people aboard, was a shock, catching 53 squid with many 40-pounders and one 6-footer. It was the first time that the Humboldt squid has ever been taken by recreational anglers out of Half Moon Bay. In San Diego this past week, it was similar story, where 51 anglers aboard the boat New Seaforth caught 290 squid.

And yet you can get skunked just as easily, as Powers reported from a trip last weekend. The squid are so voracious and such fast swimmers that they are continually on the move in their search for food. "Now you see them, no you don't."

Attributed to El Niño

Most credit the arrival of giant squid to this winter's mild El Niño event, where the water is 54 to 57 degrees off the Bay Area coast instead of a more typical 47 to 52 (for February). Sunfish, also known as mola molas, more typical in warm Southern California waters, have also been spotted in the Gulf of the Farallones in the past two weeks. According to scientists, these squid will eat 10 to 25 pounds of meat daily and can grow an inch in that day, and yet they only live a year or two.

To catch them, anglers are using a Squid Jig, which looks like a cross between a giant chrome bar and the blades on a commercial wood chipper. It is 19 inches long, weighs 11/2 pounds and has five sets of 16 spike-like points, or 480 hooks. In the midst of a feeding frenzy, though, they will hit anything.

You usually start fishing 300 to 600 feet deep, but some anglers with large capacity reels go even 1,200 feet deep. You can feel the squid wrap their tentacles around the jig and the rod gets heavy, and then suddenly, the squid takes off in 20-foot bursts, using their water jet propulsion. The best comparison is that the fight is like that of a big tail-hooked halibut. But instead of catching them one at a time, everybody aboard can hook up simultaneously, and on deck, the moment is absolute bedlam.

Yet it can get crazier. When you bring one to the surface, hundreds of giant squid can suddenly surround the boat, and they can start attacking each other. According to one story, when one squid was being gaffed at the rail, another squid shot into the air and attacked the gaff, and then several other squid turned and attacked the jumping squid.

"People go absolutely ape," Powers said. "It's like nothing we've ever seen, and like nothing we may ever see again."

With these stories, the image that keeps running through my mind is that boyhood drawing of the giant squid grabbing the sperm whale. One of my editors suggested I try to hook up with a deepwater expedition in a miniature submarine to try to video and photograph such a fight for the first time in history. It turns out that a production company will try just that in the depths of the Carrandi trench off Spain in the Atlantic Ocean.

But a new vision keeps popping into my head: Instead of grabbing a whale, a 60-foot squid instead wraps its tentacles around the miniature sub, draws it in and then, with one bite of its giant beak, crushes it.

-- Reporter's note: To help research this story, I'd like to thank field scouts Pence MacKimmie and Bob Franko, the Coastside Fishing Club, Powers, Mattusch, biologists Travis Tanaka and Carrie Wilson of the Department of Fish and Game, and the Bodega Bay Marine Lab.

-- If you want to go: \$70. Huli Cat, Princeton (650) 726-2926; New Sea Angler, Bodega Bay (707) 875-3495. The TV show, "Great Outdoors With Tom Stienstra," airs at 6:30 p.m. Sunday on KBHK-44 and Bay Area Cable 12.