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# Neon blue waves move to South OC, South Bay, here are tips on how to view, shoot images



Glowing, neon waves have been showing up off the Southern California coast in recent weeks. These shots are from Manhattan Beach Pier. (Photo courtesy of Mark Girardeau)

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## County Register

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With each wave that crashed on shore, an bright blue flash lit up the whitewash on the dark beach – like a pulse of electricity zapping the surf just off shore.

The bioluminescent waves that have been putting on surprise shows at select beaches is a mesmerizing sight, a rare phenom that has been moving around Southern California's coastline and drawing fans when word spreads that a red tide – a funky copper color during the day – is turning the waves neon after the sun goes down.

The fact that some beaches are shut down, such as in Manhattan Beach and other areas of the South Bay, makes seeing it even more challenging.

For two weeks, I've been writing about the rare show off the coast, last seen locally in 2018 off San Diego. It hasn't been seen farther north for years.

I had first, and last, witnessed the phenomenon about a decade ago during a camping trip at Doheny State Beach, a moment I'll never forget as our footsteps in the wet sand left a trail of bright, glowing marks. If you've had the chance to witness this, it's a memory you won't forget.

One video by Torrance photographer Patrick Coyne captured National Geographic-worthy footage that has gone viral, with millions of views [showing glowing dolphins swimming alongside a small Newport Coastal Adventure boat](#), lighting up the dark ocean in a memorizing scene.

So when I heard the glowing waves were near my home in San Clemente on Tuesday night, April 28, it was something I had to see, rushing down to the beach with my family in tow so we could witness nature's magnificence.

Others had gotten word of its arrival in South County, where it showed up at Poche Beach, Capistrano and in San Clemente at T-Street, the pier and the north end of the beach town.

The illuminated waves were especially bright as we reached the sand, where footprints made for a glowing ground. We grabbed sticks to dig into the sandy surface, which lit up for moments before our artwork vanished.

After about 20 minutes of watching the waves, myself and friend Monica Cameron decided it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to take a dip in glowing waters. We were at a beach we know well, just that morning surfing the waves at the same spot. We knew we'd be OK with the small waves if we stayed close to shore.

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We were about waist deep when our wiggling fingers underwater created a glowing effect, making it look like we had superpowers shooting from our hands. Shaking our shirts made our clothing illuminate and we could see the glowing waves as they rolled toward us.

We ducked underwater to allow the neon whitewash to pass over our bodies. The thought of a glowing great white coming toward us definitely crossed my mind.

We screamed and hollered and laughed and marveled at the moment. Nature sure is magnificent, isn't it?

It's unknown how long this phenom will last off the Southern California coast – sometimes it sticks around for just hours and sometimes as long as a month.

## What is it?

Julianne Steers, a marine biologist and board member with the Beach Ecology Coalition, was one of many who showed up at the shoreline on Tuesday evening to see the glowing waves. She breaks down what makes it so unique:

It is large patches of microorganisms (*Noctiluca scintillans*), rusty red by day, that are glowing electric blue at night, she said.

"Events in small form occur more regularly, the stronghold of this red tide event is a rarer phenomenon multiplied by ecological forces aligning at once: red tide, proximity to shore, new moon," she said.

Together they are producing the "optimal conditions to view these critters who are naturally endowed to produce bioluminescence."

## How to photograph it:

Orange County Outdoors photographer Mark Girardeau, one of the first to document the phenomenon when it showed up off Newport Beach earlier this month, has chased glowing waves across Southern California nearly every night since. He has taken images from a boat off Newport Beach, up in Manhattan Beach, and places in between in recent weeks, he said.



A rare phenomenon called bioluminescence was caught in this drone image on April 19, 2020 showing the off the coast of Corona Del Mar. (Photo by Mark Girardeau)

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"Some of the newer phone cameras can pick it up on photo mode if it's bright enough, but video is really tough.

"Newer phones can do night mode, which works very well for this," he said.

He recommends doing a slightly longer exposure, but not to the point where waves look blurry. He also said to use a very high ISO so the camera can capture the fainter light of the blue glow.

"And you'll need a camera lens with as low of an aperture as possible. My photos from Manhattan Beach were shot with a 70-200mm 2.8 lens," he said. "But if you really want the best shots, a mirrorless camera is great for this, because they allow so much more light in."

## Tips for seeing

A good indicator is a reddish tone in the water during the day. But even that can be tricky with currents changing and sometimes pushing the red tide further offshore at night.

There's also the added challenge of finding beaches that are still open to watch the waves, with several closures still in place due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Newport Beach is still open, and that's where it's shown up the strongest since it started. There have been several [reports of it showing up in Huntington Beach and Surfside. Manhattan Beach and El Segundo](#) have had sightings in recent days, but be warned those beaches are closed, so you might have to watch from a public sidewalk that has a view.



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•Manhattan Beach Bioluminescence•

I really thought things were starting to slow down with the bioluminescence then this happens! My favorite beach in the world had it's waves crashing with that beautiful blue glow! I've lived near Manhattan Beach my whole life and I never imagined seeing it here. For me personally it was really special and I'm grateful to live in such a beautiful area!

I also want to make sure everyone knows that this video was shot with a zoom lens. I'm mentioning that because I was not on the beach whatsoever. I stood on the sidewalk section that is still open (right before the closed off section) and is a pretty good distance away from the beach. I didn't stay for too long either, I got my videos and left with almost nobody in sight. I hope everyone's been enjoying the bioluminescence posts lately. I can't get

enough of them. Make sure you watch this video all the way through to see the brightest waves at the end!

Shot on my Sony a7iii with a Sony 70-300mm G OSS lens

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Settings were:

Shutter speed 1/50

F5.6

ISO 32,000

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San Clemente beaches have limited parking with lot closures, but if you can ride a bike or walk in, or find a parking spot, the best viewing areas were T-Street, the pier, the north stretch of beach town and at Capistrano Beach.

Remember to adhere to curfew laws and if you show up where the crowds are, maintain social distancing and be prepared with masks for extra safeguards.

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## Laylan Connelly | Reporter

Laylan Connelly started as a journalist in 2002 after earning a degree in journalism from the University of Southern California. Through the years, she has covered several cities for The Orange County Register, starting as a beat reporter in Irvine before focusing on coastal cities such as Newport Beach, Dana Point and Laguna Beach. In 2007, she was selected for a prestigious Knight New Media fellowship focusing on digital



media at UC Berkeley, where she learned skills to adapt to the ever-changing online landscape. Using a web-based approach, she turned her love for the ocean into a full-time gig as the paper's beaches reporter. The unique beat allows her to delve into coastal culture by covering everything from the countless events dotting the 42 miles of coastline, to the business climate of the surf industry, to the fascinating wildlife that shows up on the shores. Most importantly, she takes pride in telling stories of the people who make the beaches so special, whether they are surfers using the ocean to heal, or the founders of major surf brands who helped spawn an entire culture, or people who tirelessly fight to keep the coast pristine and open for all to enjoy. She's a world traveler who loves to explore the slopes during winter months or exotic surf spots around the globe. When she's not working, or maybe while she's researching a story, you can find her longboarding at her favorite surf spots at San Onofre or Doheny.

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