

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

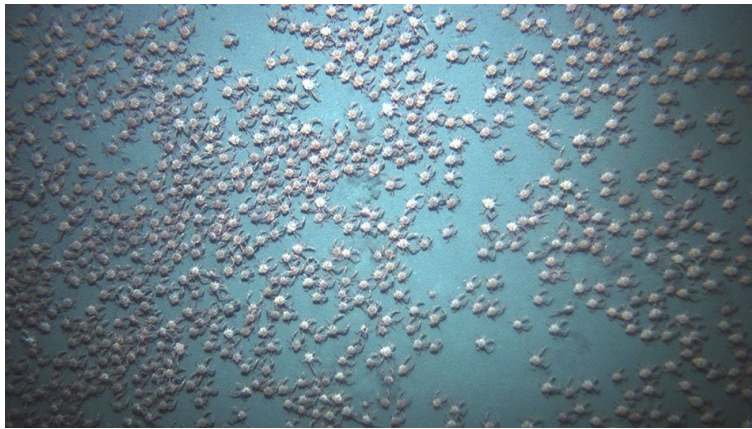
Scientists Discover Massive Swarm of Crabs

It's not clear why so many gathered in one area, but scientists believe it's the highest density of crabs ever documented.

By KAT LONG

April 12, 2016 10:34 a.m. ET

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/scientists-discover-massive-swarm-of-crabs-1460471662>



A massive swarm of thousands of crabs has been discovered near the seafloor off the western coast of Panama.

Video footage shows the swarm of five-inch-long crabs, which resemble small lobsters, amid clouds of sediment at a depth of 355 to 385 meters. Researchers from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute and their colleagues stumbled upon the throng during the final dive of an expedition to the Hannibal Bank seamount, a submerged mountain that is rich in marine life. A paper

describing the event was published Tuesday in the journal *PeerJ*.

"This phenomenon was just so striking and so shocking," said Jesus Pineda, the expedition's chief scientist, who spotted the swarm from a submersible. "I'd never seen anything like that in my life. I was mesmerized."

Dr. Pineda said the video showed the highest density of the crabs, *Pleuroncodes planipes*, ever documented. The scarlet invertebrates, nicknamed tuna crabs or pelagic red crabs, can thrive in low-oxygen conditions on the seafloor or swim in the open ocean. They eat plankton—organisms at the bottom of the food chain—and, in turn, form an important food source for more complex animals, like yellowfin tuna, birds and marine mammals.

It's not clear why so many gathered in one area. Christopher Boyko, an associate professor of biology at Dowling College in Oakdale, N.Y. who wasn't involved in the expedition, suggested that an upwelling of nutrients near the seamount may have contributed to an abundance of plankton, which could have fed a bumper crop of juvenile crabs. The swarm may represent "the tail-end of a successful recruitment season," he said.

DNA sequencing of crabs from the swarm showed they were likely the same species that washed up on San Diego's beaches last summer, an event that some scientists said may be linked to El Niño. Dr. Pineda said the Panamanian gathering of crabs, which usually live closer to Baja California, represents a new southern extreme in their range—but that the aggregation is probably unrelated to El Niño's warmer ocean conditions.

More research is needed to know if the new swarm is an anomaly, or if the crabs are more widely distributed than current data suggest.