



## BIOLUMINESCENCE: Glowing plankton thrill water watchers in Destin (PHOTOS)

[Matt Algarin](#)

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At first glance, Doug Jordan thought he was looking at a reflection on the water Sunday night, but as the bright blue streaks moved with the waves, he realized it was something quite different.

“You could just see these streaks that were almost sky blue in color,” Jordan told The Log Monday. “The moon hadn’t come out yet, so I knew it wasn’t that. The light was actually coming from inside the waves.”

What Jordan and many others along the coast were treated to is actually bioluminescence, a naturally occurring and semi-common phenomenon where light energy is released through a chemical reaction in organisms.

“This is the first time I have ever seen something like that. It was spectacular... it looked like they were dancing,” the 15-year Destin resident said.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, most types of animals in the ocean, ranging from sharks to bacteria, have bioluminescent abilities.

Allison Beauregard, an oceanographer and faculty member at Northwest Florida State College, says what most people are seeing locally is microscopic plankton.

“They use bioluminescence to communicate,” she said. “Almost like a firefly on land. Basically, they are trying to identify mates or to find something... think of it like headlights.”

Organisms also use bioluminescence as a method of protection, or to avoid predators.

Beauregard said that the natural phenomenon is best seen in the Gulf or inland waterways on calm nights. Depending on exactly what is causing the bioluminescence, Beauregard said locals might be treated to a light show for a few days.

Capt. Andrew Adams, who operates TowBoatUS in Destin, also came across the glowing waters while towing a boat in the Gulf.

“I have heard about it before, but I had never seen it myself,” he told The Log. “It was a bright greenish color... just sitting there in the waves.”

Destinite John Holahan recounted his brush with bioluminescence on The Log’s Facebook page: “I was at the Crab Trap last night and it was really cool! Looked like a bunch of glow sticks and/or fluorescent lights under the water when the waves crashed. It went on for hours and I have never seen anything like it.”

Others were reporting seeing the light show through the weekend and Monday evening at points across Northwest Florida. By Tuesday night, the spectacle was beginning to peter out, but beachgoers with cameras flocked to the shore to try to capture the memory of the glowing waves.

As for the direct cause of the bioluminescence, Beaugard said she couldn't be sure and it may be part of a seasonal cycle.

When The Log asked if there might be a connection between the recent occurrence of bioluminescence and the increased amount of algae present on local beaches, Beaugard said it was a possibility.

"Whatever is causing the algae to bloom may be causing the increase in phytoplankton, which will become bioluminescent when it's disturbed," she said.

As for whether or not there could be any relation to the oil spill, Beaugard said she "doubts it."

"I think that we are all maybe watching the water more often, but I really don't think there is any connection."

For Jordan, Sunday night's treat was special.

"Living at the beach you think you have seen everything, but sometimes you get a surprise," he said. "It was kind of like watching dolphins... once you see them they are gone."

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