





# THE RED INVASION

## of Southern California Beaches

By Jack and Sue Drafahl

In January, 1859, California suffered its first recorded red invasion. This army contained more than 15 million invaders, each armed with heavy claw-type weapons. The invaders assaulted every beach of the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. Establishing these beachheads cost hundreds of thousands of lives, but the red army continued on.

Does this sound like an old wartime movie? It's not really. Actually, this invasion has occurred three times in the last 150 years: 1859, 1959, and 1973. The invader is called *Pleuroncodes planipes* or "the red crab." It closely resembles the East Coast lobster, except that it is only five inches long. Its usual home is the open ocean off the coast of Baja, California. Little is known about the reason for the invasions, although it may have something to do with the crabs' food supply. When local resources can no longer support the red crab population, it migrates to new possible food areas; hence the red invasion.

It was during the third invasion in January, 1973, that the ship *Just Love* made contact with these creatures. At first, only a few individuals were sighted on the surface. But as the ship approached Anacapa Island, large groups were spotted. Never having seen these creatures before, the crew of the *Just Love* was anxious to anchor and suit up.

The divers entering the water met massive amounts of red crabs. Open-mouthed with awe, they almost lost their regulators. After overcoming their initial shock, the divers began photographically collecting red crabs. The little guys seemed to like this and posed many times to prove it. The sun was setting behind the beginnings of a large storm when the divers surfaced. After a quick change of tanks and reloading of cameras, they were ready for a night dive.

By the time the divers reentered the water, the concentration of crabs had increased ten-fold. The density of the beasts was so great, the divers felt as though there was no room for water. One tried to photograph the scene, but could not see through the red blur on his facemask. As he reached for the controls on his camera, he felt a sharp pain in his finger. A red crab had just prevented himself from being squashed on his new home on the Nikonos focus control. The divers became more frustrated as the dive continued. There were just too many crabs, too close! The storm was reaching full force, so the night dive was discontinued.

As the sun rose the next morning, the crew discovered the beaches were brilliant red. The crabs had been caught in the surf and piled onto the beaches 6 to 18 inches deep. A quick, exploratory trip enabled the photographers to document this exciting phenomenon. Again, the storm increased in intensity so the photographers made a hasty retreat. Little did they know the biggest surprise was still ahead.

The ship's crew pulled anchor and the equipment was secured to weather the impending storm. About one-half mile from the island, the crew came across a most impressive sight: a concentration of red crabs two miles wide and five miles long! The sea was red for as far as the eye could see. Next time you are out diving, look closely, for you may witness the return of the red invasion. »