

Silky Days

by Tobias Bernhard

While summer days in the old country might evoke images of flowery meadows, soul warming sun beams, fluffy sheep clouds and a picnic in a wicker basket, to us tropical creatures summer or “cyclone season” spells sweltering heat, suffocating humidity, towering cloud formations pregnant with flood rains and three cold showers a day just so you don’t pass out.

I love the cyclone season here in Fiji. It is full of drama, adventure and passion. It is decay and the renewal of life. If you stand still long enough you grow mould yourself. Underwater, there is all the annual spawning and breeding going on, coral, palolo worm and fish. Every summer I spot another juvenile critter I have never seen before.

Weather forecasting algorithms are as trustworthy as a gypsy with a crystal ball at this time of the year.

Then there are the storms of course but as an undying optimist you could say that even they bring renewal. Like a bush fire, they wipe the slate clean and let nature erupt with renewed vigour. Unfortunately our roof once erupted and needed renewal too after the event.

What I love most about the cyclone season is the intermittent halcyon days at sea when the weather beast rests for a moment between breaths. When the line that used to be the horizon vanishes in matrimony of sea and sky. And the water under the boat echoes the indigo sky that calls us with soft transparency. And silly lyricism sprouts from my brain so I’m obviously due for another cold shower.



*Halcyon days”. The author’s boat bobbing on a dreamy cyclone season sea.
Nikon D800 20mm 1/500s f5.6 ISO400*

It’s on such dreamy days we like to steer a course perpendicular to the decay and heat of the coast and motor until the land is only a distant memory. And then, just when it feels far enough, we cut the engine and drift with no aim or destination, goal or expectation watching the wake ripple away into infinity.

This is a dive with no destination.

This is the canvas that memories are painted on and I am quite content to just be there and well -

that.

For freedivers this is incidentally the state of mind that makes our special brand of pre-dive relaxation easy. De-clutter your surroundings and the mind seems to follow and the need to breathe seems to become insignificant.

I like to drop the safety line to just about the edge of visibility around 40 meters down even if I do not intend to dive that deep that day but just because I can. It is mesmerizing to see the bottom



*Silky sharks arriving around the boat when the engine stops
Nikon D800 20mm 1/50s f11 ISO100 SB910 TTL fill flash*

weight fall, seemingly forever, and slowly stretch the line.

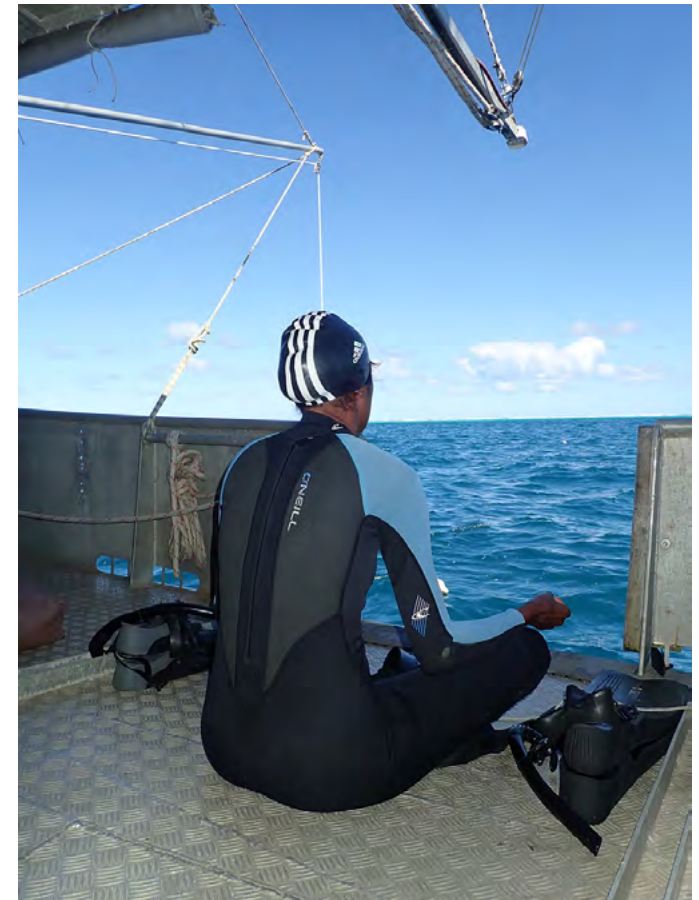
And then, on those special days when you really don't need anything more, the sea offers a special gift.

We do not chum or have spear fishing flashers in the water yet seemingly out of nowhere, and for no reason that I can discern, a few sleek shapes, gleaming coppery, glide under the boat. And as if the boat had a magnetic quality to these fluid

creatures, there appear more and more. Silky sharks (*Carcharhinus falsiformis*). The most aptly named shark I have ever seen.

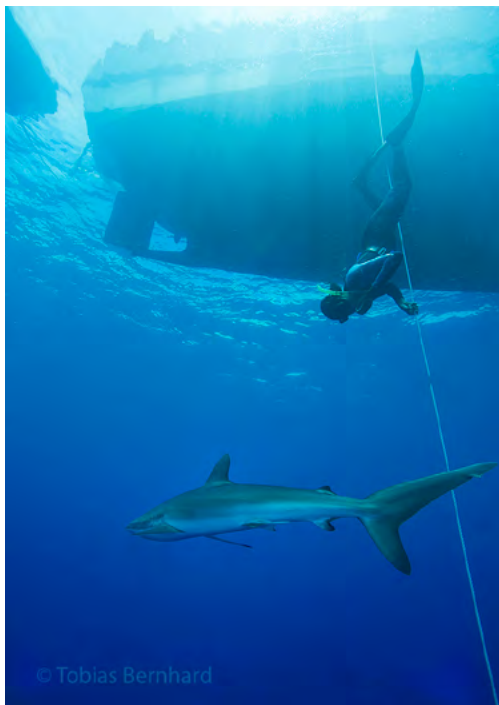
They are supposedly the most prolific pelagic shark in the tropics before the oceanic white tip and blue shark. No shark can rightly be called prolific these days with populations down to less than 10% of what they were 50 years ago. Ever more reason to appreciate encounters like these.

We count up to 20 of them.



*Freediver meditating before the dive.
Olympus TG5 1/800s f2.8 ISO100 built in flash TTL*

Silky sharks reputedly have a highly developed sense of hearing and one of my more cynical theories why they appear around our boat within minutes of stopping the engine in the middle of nowhere is that the engine noise signature of our low revving diesel is similar to those of the long liners that frequent the Koro Sea. The sharks might follow us in the hope of snatching bait or a tuna off a hook. This definitely does happen because a few of the sharks we seen have long line hooks in



***(Top) Freediver descending along safety line
Nikon D800 in Subal housing 14mm 1/160s f11 ISO400, Sea & Sea D1***

***(Above) A pack of silky sharks.
Nikon D800 in Subal housing, 14mm, 1/125s f8, ISO 100, 2x Sea & Sea D1
approx. ¼ power***

***(Right) Two silky sharks, one with a long line hook in tit's mouth.
Nikon D800 14mm 1/125s f8 ISO100, 2x Sea&Sea D1 on approx. ¼ power.***

their mouths and steel traces trailing behind them. These are the ones that got away.

In my New Zealand shark watching days I used to wait hours and spend a small fortune on bait before I would see a blue or a mako. By comparison this is too easy. I

almost have to pinch myself.

When you slip into the water with these open ocean dwellers there is a ritual of curious sniffing out going on. These sharks are not shy and genuinely interact with us; bumping us to check us out. This phase doesn't last very long and you would think



***(Top) Freediver and silky shark.
Nikon D800 in Subal housing, 14mm,
1/200s f11 ISO400 no flash***

***(Above) The sniffing out phase. Silky
sharks exploring freediver.
Nikon D800 in Subal housing***

***(Right) Silky shark. The (never) old
slow shutter speed trick.
Nikon D800 in Subal housing, 14mm,
1/8s f18, ISO100, 2x Sea & Sea
D1 probably full power. 14mm 1/250s
f5.6 ISO100***

that after they have satisfied their curiosity they would leave. But they don't. They keep cruising around us sedately and at a slightly more respectful distance for hours and we can commence our relaxation breath-up on the down-line to prepare for a dive.

Their interest gets peaked again

when one of us dives straight down. They follow us down the line and circle us at the turn-around (the tennis ball before the bottom weight), then scatter.

As freedivers, we turn inside ourselves during a dive and I like to believe that this attitude is something the sharks sense and regard as non-

threatening. Or is it the absence of attitude that makes them behave like this? I have observed the same with other sea creatures when you keep your eyes closed falling down the line, then open them for the turn just to see a big old turtle staring at you in apparent wonder. It only seems to work when we dive on the line with

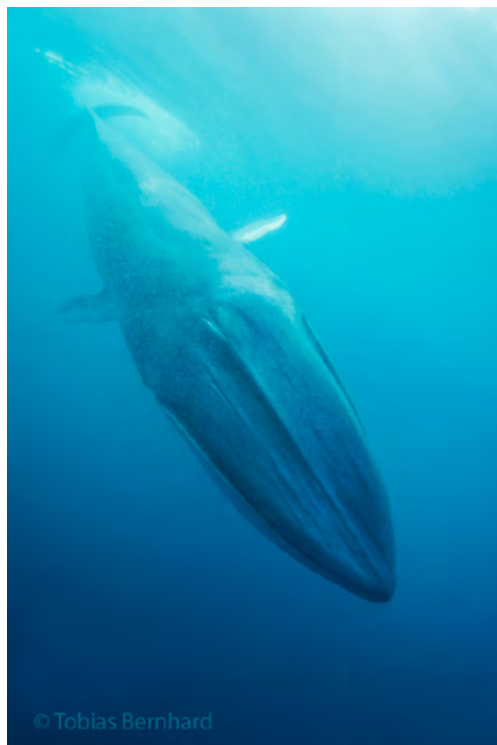
proper relaxation technique. If you swim down after them you get to see mostly shark tail.

They also seem to like the camera if you let them approach you. I guess it's the reflective dome port they come to check out.

What I love so much about these encounters is that they seem by chance but then the animals choose to stay with us. It is a very different thing from a shark feed or a whale watch encounter. A wild animal, un-habituated not running away from you and letting you be amongst them for hours ... I don't know about you but it gives me a feeling of euphoria not to mention a few half decent shots in the can.

We never tire of it and it's usually the breeze, announcing one of those scary, black squalls, that will turn the serene scene into wet mayhem as quick as you can say Jack Robinson. Sometimes, believe it or not, it's the cold. Three hours in 30 degrees of water does that, even in a 3mm steamer. I've definitely been in the tropics too long.

Silky sharks are not the only transients in this vast habitat. Sometimes the blue desert comes to life with a pod of pilot whales accompanied by spinner dolphins or a boil up of bait fish and skip jack; on even rarer occasions, Minky whales. But much as I love those other



Minky whales.
Nikon D800 in Subal housing, 14mm,
1/200s, f4, ISO800, no flash.

encounters, they are comparatively fleeting and involve a good deal of stealthy approach if you want to see the animals underwater. In my experience our love for cetaceans is not reciprocated much.

That's why I love the Silky days.

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