

Great White Highs And Lows

by Nigel Marsh

I enjoy leading photography groups to great dive destinations in Australia and overseas. You can always guarantee a wonderful range of subjects for divers to photograph on these trips. And everyone generally comes home having improved their photography skills, and hopefully with some amazing images. But when it comes to a great white photo trip to the Neptune Islands off South Australia you can never guarantee good photos or even any photos at all!

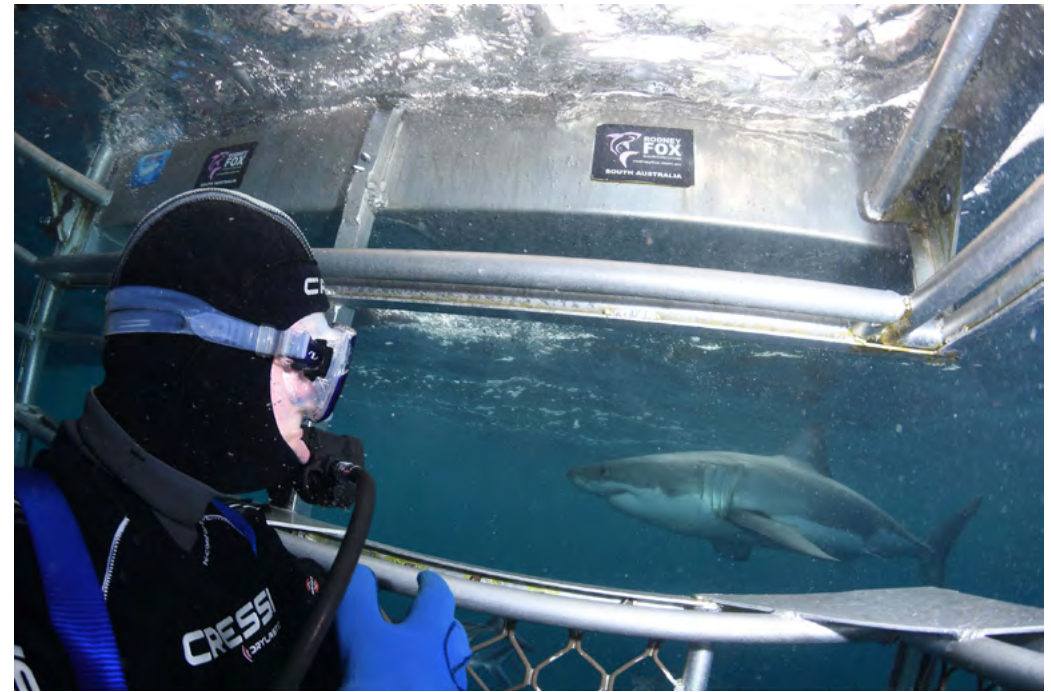
I have travelled to Port Lincoln four times over the last thirty years to photograph great white sharks and Australian sea lions. The photographic challenges on these trips are immense and always keep you on your toes, and often leave you wanting more, or in some cases anything.

On my first trip we had perfect weather, but no sharks, even after four days of throwing smelly burley off the back of the boat. We even had to take turns doing this stinky chore, even at 2am, as it was a very budget trip. And while I have seen sharks on subsequent trips, I have never got what I considered to be a great 'great white' photo, as the sharks were either shy, staying clear of the cage, or

obscured by masses of silver trevally! My photography attempts with Australian sea lions were even worse, as I simply had never had a chance to get in the water with them, due to rough weather or the dive operator saying there wasn't time.

So, leading a fresh group of budding photographers on my fourth trip in November 2022, I knew I couldn't do any worse than my previous photography attempts - things could only get better, I hoped. For this trip I booked our group on a three-day voyage with Rodney Fox Shark Expeditions, heading out to the Neptune Islands on their great vessel MV Rodney Fox. I hadn't been on this new boat and found it to be well layout and very comfortable. The vessel is 32m long and accommodates 18 guests in either twin or double cabins.

Before boarding the vessel, I led half our group on a photography side trip, a special day tour around Port Lincoln organised by Untamed Escapes. This wonderful wildlife tour saw us exploring the Port Lincoln National Park, the rugged coastal cliffs and visiting the wildlife sanctuary at Mikkira Station. The



Helen Rose watching the sharks. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing, single Inon Z330 strobe, ISO 200, f9, 1/200

The Neptune Islands



wildlife encounters included fields of Cape Barren geese, emu fathers with their family of chicks, black-faced kangaroos feeding, Port Lincoln parrots, scorpions, a shingleback lizard and an incredible number of

MV Rodney Fox



koalas. The tour also included a great seafood lunch and we finished it with some wine tasting at the Boston Bay Winery. Everyone had a great time, so we will include this side tour on future trips.



A great white shark lunges for the bait. Nikon D500, Nikkor 18-300mm lens, ISO 200, f7.1, 1/320

Boarding the boat at 7pm, we met the crew, sorted paperwork, and sat through the safety briefs before getting underway. It was only a three-hour run to Thistle Island, where we sheltered for the night. Early the next morning we pushed through a 3m rolling swell, fortunately with no wind, to journey another three hours to the Neptune Islands.

Once anchored, the surface cage was deployed and the chum started. For weeks before the trip Andrew Fox had been giving me regular updates, telling me about all the feisty sharks coming very close to the cages. Andrew added it was the best start to a summer season they had experienced in eight years, and I couldn't argue the point when the first shark turned up after only five minutes of burling. That one was quickly followed by another three. Four sharks in the first half hour, and the best thing was they were coming very close to the cage.



Australian sea lions at Hopkins Island. Nikon D500, Nikkor 18-300mm lens, ISO 200, f8, 1/640

This was going to be good.

The only problem I could see for photography was the bouncing surface cage from the ground swell rolling into the bay at North Neptune Island. There were also a few silver trevally about, but not the numbers that I had experienced last time.

Before the trip I had warned everyone not to expect documentary style action, as the sharks are wary at times and often only come close to the cage when following a bait. Well, that advice was mostly ignored by this group of sharks that were closely inspecting the cage, often when no bait was even in the water.

The best photography advice I could give to everyone was video is easier when the cage is bouncing around, as holding a camera steady out of the gap between the bars for still images is a nightmare at times. Fortunately, the group took my advice. However, as I only shoot stills, I didn't follow my own advice.

The action from the surface cage was incredible, the best I have seen, and at times I



Two sharks at the cage. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing, Inon Z330 strobe, ISO 200, f13, 1/250

could see four sharks swimming around in the 12m visibility. And the sharks were coming very close, checking out the cage, and its occupants, every few minutes. But still photography was hard work.

I use a DSLR in an Isotta housing, so not a small housing, and I found pushing the housing between the gap in the bars very difficult, as I barely had 2cm clearance top and bottom. And with the cage constantly bouncing up and down, throwing me around, there were times when I simply couldn't take photos, to avoid smashing the housing into the cage. One saving grace was my 6 inch mini dome, as on previous trips I had struggled to push an 8 inch dome between the gap!

Also because of the bouncing, I couldn't look through the viewfinder, but had to blinding push the housing forward and snap images as the sharks cruised by. So there was a great deal of hit and miss framing. The final photographic complication was the masses of silver trevally, they may not have been as numerous as my last trip, but they were still

bad, getting in the way of the camera on numerous occasions. These fish were lucky the Neptune Islands are a marine sanctuary as the little buggers were driving me crazy at times.

But even with those challenges I still got my best great white images, as with so many sharks coming close it was hard to miss. The bouncy conditions meant the crew couldn't deploy the ocean floor cage on the first day, but fortunately the swell dropped over night so we could use this special cage on the second day.

Photography from the ocean floor cage is so much easier, except when the silver trevally swarm. And watching the sharks cruise across the bottom and circle overhead is simply breath-taking. I probably didn't get the two best runs in the bottom cage, with only two close passes from the sharks, but the others had some incredible action with three or four sharks circling the cage.

Over our two days we had six different sharks each day. Three very feisty females were our favourites, all around 3.2m long and we nicknamed them Rudolf, Cat Lady and Tag Girl. We also saw some larger males, including a 4m long one that briefly visited the ocean floor cage. But the biggest shark we saw was the 4.5m long giant Scarface. He was an impressive sight, but unfortunately didn't come close to the cage.

After two prefect days with the great white sharks, we headed back to the mainland in the late afternoon, so we could have the final day with the Australian sea lions. And the weather gods were finally kind enough to let me swim with these amazing mammals.

In the morning we anchored in shallow water off Hopkins Island, a popular haul out spot for the sea lions. On the beach we could see about fifty



Rudolf on patrol. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing, single Inon Z330 strobe, ISO 200, f13, 1/250

sea lions, while a dozen more were frolicking in the shallows. A small swell was rolling in, stirring up the sandy bottom, not ideal conditions for photography, but there was no way I was going to miss out after a thirty year wait!

Half our group decided to snorkel, and the other half dive. With a maximum depth of 3m you didn't really need scuba, but it is just easier to take images. I rolled into the water and headed over the sand. The visibility was only 5m, but that didn't

deter me, especially when the first two sea lions swam straight up to me and started to perform.

For the next forty minutes I was in heaven photographing these playful sea lions as they swam circles around us. But my favourite moments were when they settle down, and simply rested on the bottom and stared at me with their lovely puppy-dog eyes. At one point I had six sea lions crowded in front of me, three of them in a pile. It is sad to think that these wonderful Australian sea lions are



Sea lion in the seagrass. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing, single Inon Z330 strobe, ISO 200, f14, 1/200

endangered, and their numbers are still in decline.

After lunch we snorkelled with another group of Australian sea lions at Grindle Island. The visibility was much better here, but the sea lions were a little shier, as they rarely receive visitors at this haul out site.

The great white photography trip was a huge success, with everyone having amazing experiences with great white sharks and Australian sea lions, and capturing some incredible photos and videos. I got my best great white photos yet, even a few decent ones, but I know I can do better, and I

wasn't really happy with the Australian sea lion images, so you can bet I will be back for another go, sooner or later.

Nigel Marsh

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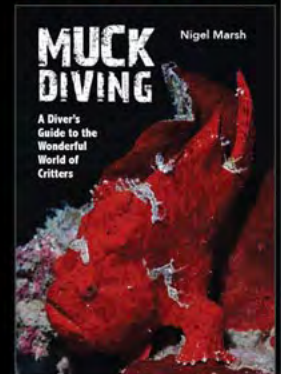
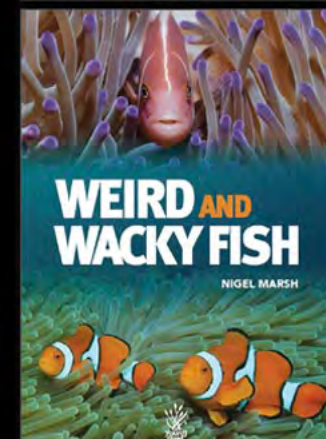
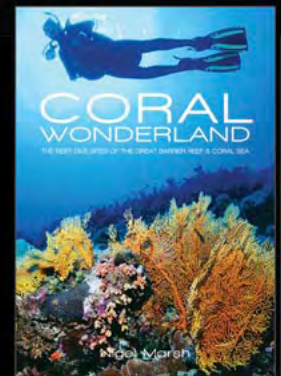
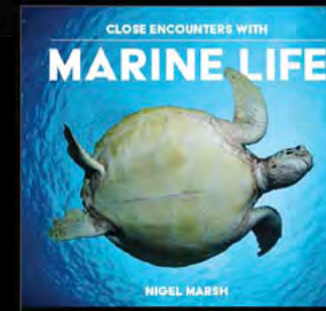
www.rodneyfox.com.au

Several times a year Nigel Marsh leads special photography group trips, like this one to the Neptune Islands. You don't have to be an underwater photographer to join these trips, but if you are, Nigel is on hand to give you daily tips and feedback on your images.

NIGEL MARSH

Photography

Nigel Marsh is an Australian photojournalist, underwater photographer and author. Working with New Holland publishers, Nigel has produced a number of guide books for divers and snorkelers, and also a series of children's books with marine related themes.



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