In search of Basking Sharks

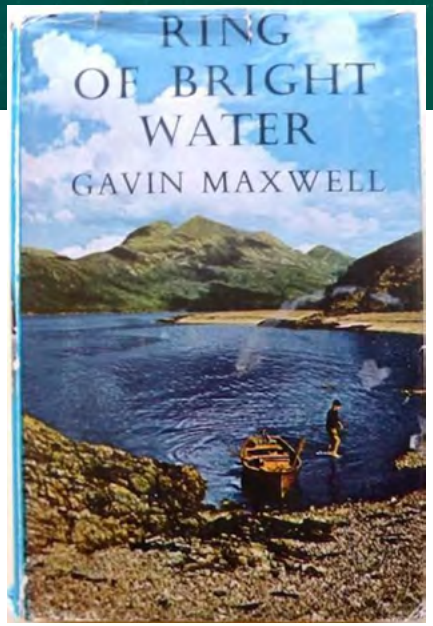
by Colin Munro

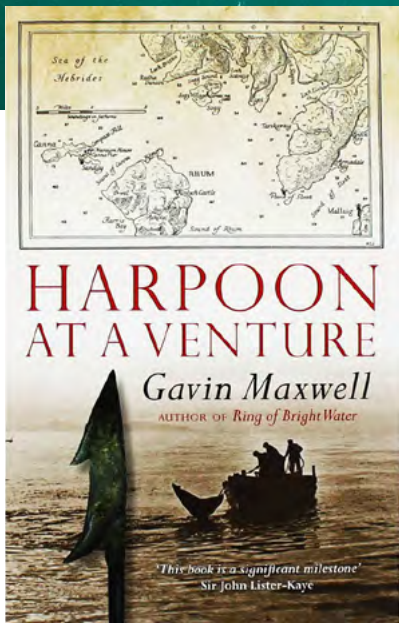
Basking sharks are the second largest fish on the planet. I'd been fascinated with them ever since reading Gavin Maxwell's Ring of Bright Water trilogy as a kid; although primarily a story about the pet otters he kept and rural life in a remote area of Northwest Scotland, the book also mentioned these giant fish that arrive each summer off Scotland's west coast, and his earlier adventures operating a harpooning ship to catch them.

Later I read Harpoon at a Venture, the story of Maxwell's attempt to establish a basking shark fishery on the island of Soay shortly after the end of WW2. The operation was a financial disaster, but even in the bloody business of harpooning and butchering sharks, Maxwell's fine eye for detail and his innate love of nature shone through. Although autobiographical in style, Harpoon at a Venture probably contained more detail about the behaviour and appearance of basking sharks than any other piece of writing at that time.

Years rolled past. After brief periods in the military, as a salvage diver, a motorcycle courier and a nature reserve warden; in other words pretty directionless, I earned my degree in biology and, returning to the land of my birth, began working at a marine biological station on a small island of the west coast of Scotland.

During the summer months I spent a lot of time at sea, from Arran up through the Sea of the Hebrides and northwards through The Minch. We would occasionally spot the big dark triangles that were the dorsal fins of basking sharks, and sometimes the tips of their snout and tail, as they





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www.colinmunrophotography.com/blog/basking-shark-images-cornwall/

cruised just beneath the surface, mouth agape, hoovering up plankton. Our work was primarily focused on scientific diving surveys, recording marine life. Despite hundreds of hours spent underwater I had not so much as a glimpse of a basking shark beneath the waves.

As it happened, the last of Gavin Maxwell's successors, the last hunter of basking sharks in the U.K., a larger than life character called Howard McCrindle, lived on the same small island as I. I did not personally know him, but I would regularly see his boat moored in the nearby port of Largs, distinctive with it's high spotting seat mounted on a frame near the bow, and the harpoon itself immediately in front. Sometimes there would be a shark more than half the length of the boat, lying on deck waiting on delivery to Ayr fishmarket.

More time passed. I move to the southwest of England, now working as a freelance marine biologist and environmental consultant. Much of my work was focussed on diving surveys at that time, but still, I had yet to see a basking shark underwater.

The two best places in the World to see basking sharks are probably the west coast of Scotland and off Southwest England, especially West Cornwall, yet despite living and working in both regions for several years I had yet to see one underwater.

So around 2006 I decided I was going to make it happen.

I contacted a Cornish boat skipper operating out of Falmouth and arranged to join a group of technical divers who were diving wrecks off Falmouth. Late afternoon the end of their two dives, Gary (the boat skipper) would pick me up from Mylor Marina, a little north of Falmouth harbour, and we would spend an hour cruising the coastline hunting for sharks. As chance would have it, shortly after I boarded Gary's boat, he received information from other skippers that a pair of basking sharks had been spotted just off Pendennis Point, near the entrance to the Fal Estuary, a little over three miles distance away.

Once there, we spotted the sharks almost immediately. They were both large adults, maybe seven or eight metres long. They were feeding in a large cloud of greenish, plankton-rich water, slowly moving in large, lazy circles as they filtered and swallowed vast numbers of tiny copepods. I checked my camera one last time, slipped my mask, fins and snorkel on, and waited.

Once we were reasonably close Gary slowed the boat, and on his signal I slipped over the side. Once in the water the current immediately hit me. Swimming as hard as I could, glancing up and back occasionally to check which way the divers on the boat were pointing (down at sea level I could only see a few metres on front of me through the cloudy water) to make sure I was still swimming towards the sharks.

From a distance basking sharks appear to be moving slowly, their tails swing from side to side in a very lazy fashion. But this is deceptive, rather like watching a train in the distance. Up close these giants are moving like express locomotives. A snorkeller wearing fins has no hope of keeping

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Fellow marine biologist, Kat Brown, acted as boat driver for me when we launched out of Plymouth

pace with them. They move as if completely unaffected by the current that I was having to fight hard against.

My plan was to get in front of them and wait for them to pass me.

Directed by shouts and waving arms from the dive boat, I positioned myself around 20 metres in front of the leading shark, and hung in the water watching and waiting.

The first shark began to appear out of the green haze. Basking sharks swim, feeding, with their mouths agape. Water is rammed into their mouths by the forward motion. This water then passes out through their gill slits, passing over gill lamellae where oxygen is absorbed and waste carbon dioxide released, the gills functioning in a manner analogous to our lungs. But basking shark gills have an additional feature; gill rakers.

The bristles of gill rakers allow seawater to pass through, but trap zooplankton. Once sufficient planktonic animals have accumulated on the inside of the rakers the shark will close it's mouth, swallow, and the process will repeat. The wide-open mouth of a large basking shark will measure around two metres, from the tip of its snout to its lower jaw. I knew well that basking sharks are not at all aggressive, but still, the sight a seven metre long fish bearing down on me at speed, with its mouth wide open was a little disconcerting.

I was mostly concerned that the shark would collide with me accidentally. Being bumped by a nearly four tonne shark was probably going to hurt. I need not have worried; about a metre away from me the shark turned slightly and cruised past me.

For the next 20 minutes or so I simply hung in the water while the two sharks swum past, then circled round again to pass close by. My 36 exposure roll of film was exhausted (this was still a time when I shot exclusively on film underwater, on a Nikonos camera system) so I signalled to the boat and slowly began to swim towards it.

My first encounter with basking sharks underwater had been so easy, I had no idea how lucky I was. It would be three years before I was able to repeat the experience. The intervening summers, with many days spent on charter boats or out on my own Zodiac inflatable proved that basking sharks can be shy, skittish, or - more often than not - simply not visible at the surface. In June 2009, a few weeks after my 51st birthday, I got lucky again.

Getting my friend, and fellow marine biologist, Kat Brown, to act as boat driver for me, we launched out of Plymouth, South Devon, and headed around to the Great Mewstone, a rocky island just outside the mouth of Plymouth Sound. Currents run hard around the Mewstone, and basking sharks are occasionally spotted there.

We were in luck, spotting one within an hour or so of slow cruising around; I got ready to get in the water with it. I had recently purchased a Fuji Finepix S2 pro (essentially a Nikon D80 with a Fuji sensor) and Subal housing. As the S2 pro took Nikon full frame lenses (of which I had many) this system worked well for me.

Getting ready to enter the water with the Gates Z1 housing (with standard wide angle port, not Fathom, on this occasion). Photo credit: Kat Brown.

As we approached we saw there were two sharks, similar to the previous encounter. This pair were moving in a big figure of eight path, with each pass slowly tracking further east. I adopted the same technique, being dropped ahead of the sharks and swimming towards and ahead of them at approximately 90 degrees to their path. Breathing hard, my heart pounding, I swum as fast as my legs would propel me, but the shark was faster. My camera pushed in front of me I clicked off frames as the shark passed ahead of me.

Despite swimming at full speed the shark easily outpaced me, swimming past as I approached. For scale this is an uncropped image, taken with an ultra-wide lens Tokina 7-14mm lens at 9mm (13mm, full frame equivalent). Numerous parasitic sea lamprey (Petromyzon marinus) can be seen attached between the sharks pelvic fins.

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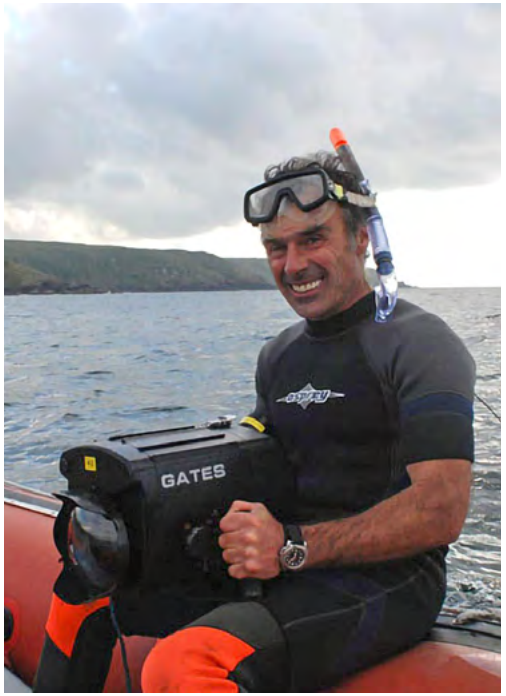

On the second pass the basking shark came almost straight towards me. I could clearly see the gill slits and gill rakers inside its mouth as it came close. Once again, when it seemed as if the shark was certain to smack right into me, it altered direction slightly and cruised past me..

On a high, I was keen to get back in the water with the baskers as soon as possible. I had just acquired a Sony HDV-Z1u video camera (recording a then pretty stunning 1080i) along with a Gates housing and Fathom SWP44 120 degree wide angle port. It was the perfect system for getting great footage of them. So nine days later Kat and I hitched my old Zodiac

Mark III behind my even older Series 3 Land Rover, and headed 100 miles West to St Ives in North Cornwall. There we launched the Zodiac at the slipway and headed west. Eight miles west of St Ives, Pendeen Lighthouse marks Pendeen headland and the narrow channel between it and Wra Rocks (aka The Three Stone Oar) some 200 metres offshore. This was to be our turnaround point, before we lost the protection of the coastline and were exposed to the prevailing southwesterlies, and the strong currents off Land's End. As we approached the sea had already picked up a slight chop. That was when we when we saw it, the unmistakeable black triangle of a basker's dorsal fin. Time to get in the water.

The Gate's Housing is solidly engineered, to put it mildly. Complete with Fathom Lens and external monitor it weighed in at around 30 kilograms. A significant workout for biceps and shoulder muscles.

After last minute checks I slipped into the water. Once underwater the video camera and housing was near neutral buoyancy, but that was due to the large volume of water it displaced. With the hydrodynamic sleekness of a shipping container a not insignificant amount of thrust was required to move it through the water at any speed.

We had judged it too fine. As I hit the water the shark was already in sight, heading past at speed and disappearing into the distance. But almost immediately it turned again

and headed back, almost straight towards me. Finning as fast as I could I started swimming to place myself in front of the shark, but once again its speed was deceptive and it cruised past a metre or two in front of me, close enough for me to count the number of parasitic lampreys clamped to its underside. Again and again the shark cruised past, wheeled and headed back in my direct, apparently oblivious to my presence. Once it was too far in front Kat would pick me up, then drop me in front of it again. After the third drop, we swapped over to give Kat a chance in the water, then we decided it was time to head for home.

Colin Munro

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