

Basking Shark Aggregations

By Nigel Motyer

You'd be forgiven for thinking that if Nemo was 12 meters long, they'd have found him a lot quicker and it would have been a much shorter film, but maybe not. Basking sharks are huge, but despite their size they are, or perhaps were, very hard to find. I think I was diving nearly twenty five years before I managed to get into the water beside one. Despite their size, man they were hard to find !

Those first experiences were usually in the early season, April or May, just as the plankton blooms were starting and the basking sharks reappeared around the south west coast of Ireland. They would then work their way up the west coast, gather briefly off the northern shores of Malin Head then run up to the Hebrides where they were frequently seen between the islands of Coll and Tiree, just west of Mull. I say reappeared but in truth we didn't really know where they'd been, perhaps they'd never left, perhaps they just went deep to ride out winter storms. Despite these being the second biggest fish in the ocean, very little was known about their lifecycle. That all changed about fifteen years ago.

Basking sharks, or Sunfish as they were sometimes called, were actively hunted in Ireland, the last commercial fishery for them was based on Achill Island but that closed down in the mid 1980's. At the turn of the last century their oil was highly valued and fuelled the street lamps of major European cities but when gas and electricity took



Mating behaviour is generating huge aggregations of sharks and the stretch of coastline from Loop Head up to the Aran Islands seems to be a hot spot. Now, in late summer, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of adult sharks gather at this location, to aggregate, form Torus's and, we believe, mate. Nikon D850, 8-15mm lens, Nauticam housing. 1/250th @f7.1 ISO 800

over that task the fishery became less and less viable, particularly as the populations of sharks declined to perilously low numbers. I remember visiting Achill Island as a freshly qualified diver in 1987 and seeing dead basking sharks tied up floating beside the pier at Purteen, waiting to be rendered and for years there was an old rusting tank of basking shark oil sitting on the pier waiting for the value of the oil to get back to a commercial price.

Not surprisingly, after the fishery closed down basking sharks were a very rare site, occasionally, on really calm days you might spot, a nose, dorsal

fin and a lazy sweeping tail breaking the surface. They had the reputation of being shy, and with good reason, as they likely associated boats with harpooners and kept well clear. On the few occasions in the 80's and 90's that I saw them I never got close enough to see them properly underwater and certainly not to take a usable picture.

As my fascination with sharks of all types grew, I tried a few times to go specifically looking for "baskers" in Ireland but without any real success. It always felt that the Basking shark action was happening somewhere else. For a while the Isle



An earlier image of a Basking shark feeding on krill. The visibility was so bad that I frequently didn't see the shark until it was a meter or two in front of my camera. Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17 lens in an Aquatica Housing. ISO 400 1/80th at F4.5

Of Man was a hot spot and then Cornwall, in fact the first time I saw a really clear image of a basking shark was when Charlie Hood shared some fantastic images he'd taken in clear waters off Cornwall.

Then about fifteen years ago I got a call from a ranger from our National Parks and Wildlife service asking if I could be in Donegal the following morning as they had just come in from a day of tagging basking sharks and they wanted somebody to get into the water and photograph the sharks they were tagging so they could identify

the sex of the tagged sharks. I loaded the cameras and snorkelling gear into the car and made the four hour drive north.

The next day we tagged nearly 60 sharks. I'd never seen anything like it, there were fins everywhere. It was flat calm off Malin Head with big patches of pink Krill in the water and the sharks were in a feeding frenzy. I would hide out in a ball of Krill and wait for the sharks to barrel through with mouths agape. In the ball the viz was two meters, swim outside the Krill and the viz was more



A drone image of a basking shark torus forming. If you look closely you can see a small snorkler in amongst the group giving a sense of scale. The Rib on the top left is 7 meters. DJI Mavic Pro 2. 1/15th @f2.8 ISO 400

like fifteen meters. Just an incredible day. Filled with enthusiasm we went out the following day but after 9 hours searching on the water, covering fifty miles of the Malin Head coast, we saw nothing, not a single shark. It was nuts, how could so many 10-12 meter sharks just disappear in 24 hours, But they did, and I didn't see another basking shark for seven years!

Roll forward to 2016 and we were fifteen miles offshore chumming to lure blue sharks, and hopefully a mako or porbeagle, to the boat, it was looking like it might be a quiet day but as we waited we got a call from a local fisherman to say that he had a group of Humpback whales beside his

boat, he knew we were taking pictures and thought it might be interesting for us. We anchored off the chum and headed the couple of miles to where he was and spent a wild hour watching Humpback whales lunge feeding.

When the whales had dispersed we headed back over towards our chum slick but on the way spotted a couple of fins, I jumped in and was staggered to see what we thought was one or two basking sharks was actually about 12 basking sharks circling just below the surface. This was clearly different to all my other basking shark encounters, there was no feeding and the group stayed



In the torus we found that the sharks are generally very ambivalent to the snorklers, often they were curious and swam towards us underwater and very frequently they would follow us as we swam back to the boat. Nikon D850, 16-35mm lens, Nauticam housing. ISO 800, 250th @F14

in a tight circular formation. We now know this is a Torus, the name given to a basking shark aggregation when the multiple sharks form a nose to tail circle in what is believed to be a mating behaviour.

It really was a remarkable encounter; we spent about an hour in the water with the sharks before they slowly dropped down into deeper water. A little later that day when unsuccessfully trying to

get into a group of Bluefin Tuna, we came across what we thought must have been the same group, in all likelihood though it was probably a different group but basking shark sightings were so rare in our experience, we just didn't believe there could be two huge groups within the same few kilometres of each other.

What we now believe is that the Basking shark population has steadily grown since the ban on



Within a torus we never saw any feeding as the water was mostly reasonably clear but one of two of the sharks yawn and almost look like they are flushing their gills from time to time. Nikon D850, 8-15mm lens, Nauticam housing. 1/320th @f9 ISO 800

commercial fishing came into effect forty years ago, the populations are now recovering to the point that mating behaviour is generating huge aggregations of sharks and this stretch of coastline and from Loop Head up to the Aran Islands seems to be a hot spot. Now, in late summer hundreds, perhaps even thousands of adult sharks gather at this location,



Many of the adults have lampreys attached to them, These ugly parasitic fish use a circle of teeth-like hooks to dig into the flesh of the sharks and feed on their blood. Its speculated that the sharks breaching behaviour may be to try to dislodge the lampreys from their skin. Panasonic Lumix GH5, 14-42 Panasonic lens with Nauticam WWL B supplementary lens in a Nauticam Housing. 1/125th @f6.3 ISO 400

to aggregate, form Torus's and, we believe, mate.

I say we believe, because in truth we don't know for sure that this is what's happening here. I don't believe anybody has actually seen mating happen but we have some evidence that this is what they doing. The sharks are mostly socialising rather than feeding, there seems to be some subtle inter shark behaviours like nodding to each other and some display colour changes, becoming

much paler for periods but without doubt the most obvious and dramatic behaviour is that they jump. At times we were seeing Basking sharks breach around our boat every five minutes. In fact this is the easiest way we found to locate sharks as it's hard to miss a 12 meter shark leaping right out of the water, even from quite some distance. These are huge events, massively energetic and at times very dramatic.

I was in the water a few meters from my buddy when a shark



breached and landed between us. We didn't see it happening but we sure saw and heard the landing. We were completely engulfed in white water but close enough to see some lampreys shaken off the shark by the splash. Researchers continue to speculate why they do this; is it to rid themselves of Lampreys, an eel like parasitic fish that digs into their skin, or is to attract the attention of other sharks? We don't know for sure but it seems to happen predominantly at these aggregations, we don't see it at other times of the year.

My personal view is that these mass gathering events are a mating aggregation and although we haven't seen it yet, at some point in these groups the sharks come together and mate. One of the reasons I believe this is that frequently I can see abrasions on the pectoral fins of the female sharks. When I look through my images and video from these events, you can clearly see the

difference between the males clean smooth pectorals and the abrasion lines on the females fins. We know other shark species mate by the males biting down on the pectoral fins of the females to hold them in place while they fertilise them.

It's a rough process that in toothed sharks can leave the females fairly beaten up. With basking sharks, their teeth are much less sharp but still many of the females show signs of these types of tooth abrasions on their pectoral fins. So we haven't seen actual mating yet but I'm very conscious that the aggregations we have seen to-date have largely been seen and observed at the surface but, using sonar, we could clearly see these groups gathering in deeper waters. When diving in these areas we have swum in amongst huge numbers of sharks gathering on the bottom in the deeper darker waters and I believe that in time, this is where we will see mating occur.

Its funny how things come back to you, but back in 2009 or perhaps 2010, I was working on a BBC production called Waterworld and the underwater cameraman on that show was Doug Anderson of Blue Planet fame and an absolute legend in the underwater world.

One day between dives we were chatting and he told me he'd seen this unusual basking shark behaviour up in



A split shot of a basking shark near the surface. Nikon D850, 8-15mm lens, Nauticam housing. 1/160 @f6.3 ISO800

Frequently when sighting only one or two fins on the surface means there are many more sharks in the layers of the Torus below. Nikon Z8, 8-15mm lens Nauticam housing. ISO 2000, 250th @ F8

Malin Head. It became a little segment in one of the episodes of the show, but looking at it now, clear as day, it was a basking shark torus, before we even knew that was a thing Doug had filmed it while freediving, complete with a breach captured on camera too, probably the first time that torusing and breaching in Basking sharks had been filmed anywhere in the world. We didn't know it then but perhaps it was an early sign of the

recovering populations.

For shark enthusiasts the good news is that since those first sightings of Toruses back in 2010 and 2016 it has become more common to see this event. In the last four years, at the end of the summer, if the weather is calm, big numbers of sharks are seen from the cliffs around Loop Head.

The growth of Instagram wildlife enthusiasts and drones has seen our feeds flooded with video clips of

shivers of basking sharks (yes, that's the collective noun for basking sharks) around this time and while this is lovely to see it brings home the need for sensible protection efforts for these areas.

There is no doubt this location is a basking shark hot spot with global significance for their populations. It's critical that both the sharks and these areas are given protection and in a positive step towards this in 2022 the Irish government passed legislation to give the sharks protected status.

In October 2022 they were added to the list of protected species in the 1973 Wildlife Act and a code of conduct was published on how to safely interact when in the vicinity of the sharks. Now, if you want to photograph or film the sharks you must apply for licence to do so from the Irish National Parks and Wildlife Service. It couldn't come at a more important time too as although commercial fishing for these sharks has stopped, other dangers still remain.

This year my buddy filmed a couple of dead



basking sharks on the bottom after they had been caught in a tangle net, drowned and dumped back into the sea. If these areas are a critical mating location for these still perilously rare animals, we must protect these locations from this type of activity so the fight goes on to get these locations now designated as Marine Protection Areas (MPAs).

In a world where so many of the stories of our bigger sharks are tough to read, massive population declines and brutal over



When we saw breaching sharks but found no sharks on the surface we could see them using sonar on the seabed. Sometimes when diving in these areas a big group of sharks would swim by. Nikon D850, 8-15mm lens, Nauticam housing. 1/250th @f8 ISO 2500

fishing, actually the basking shark story may turn out to be a real beacon of hope. In my lifetime we have gone from nearly killing the last few left, to stopping the fishing, granting them protection and watching the populations recover.

Just this last August in Galway, the Irish Basking Shark

Project ran a conference for Basking shark researchers from all over the world to gather and share their knowledge and data. The thing that struck me was that so many of the researchers from other parts of the world are still struggling to find their sharks.

The Irish experience

tells us there is hope in the recovery efforts. Something we should all feel good about then is that this magnificent fish, the second biggest fish in the ocean is recovering and finally finding a safe haven again, beneath Irish seas.

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