

Parting shot

Late spring and early summer brings the first plankton bloom around the coast of Cornwall, the UK's south west peninsula. This first plankton bloom heralds the arrival of basking sharks around this coastline and many enthusiastic (some may say obsessive!) underwater photographers eagerly await reports of the first sightings in the hope of getting close to these denizens. This year they seemed to appear only briefly during a calm spell in May and then reports dried up and I thought I had missed my chance for another twelve months.

Fast forward to late July when I had joined a group from the local Wildlife Trust who were conducting an eel grass survey in the shallow waters of Mounts Bay. These beds are full of life and are a great place to find juvenile species and I was concentrating on hunting small cuttle fish with some success. This objective changed dramatically when one of the divers surfaced to report finding a basking shark tangled in a gill net just 150m or so from the shore in 8m depth.

We dived again in the belief that the shark was dead and we would only be recording the sad result of this form of indiscriminate fishing. It was a shocking image to find this noble beast wrapped tightly in the net following her struggles to escape - this was a female shark perhaps 12ft/4m in length - and we began to record this with stills and video. Suddenly our excitement rose as we realised that there was movement in her eye and that she was struggling to open her mouth against the constraint of the net - handling her caused her to thrash about, a disaster for photography but a delight for the prospect of releasing her.

We quickly set about cutting the net along the length of the shark - fortunately some of the knives were up to the job, most are not! Eventually we were able to roll the shark out of the remains of the net where she lay on her back motionless. We exchanged worried looks and I am sure we all thought initially we had been too late but agreed by signals to roll her over onto her belly. This thankfully was the catalyst for her to make some efforts to move and she struggled to make some forward motion whilst repeatedly nose diving into the sand. Eventually she began to gain some lift and with much thrashing began to move forward quickly gaining more speed and lift. We struggled now to keep up and for a few exasperating moments we watched her begin to make a turn in the gloom back towards the net! Thoughts of how you persuade a determined basking shark to change course flashed through my mind but luckily some sixth sense must have kicked in and she veered off towards open water. We exchanged looks of universal glee, shook hands, collected the cameras and headed, elated, for the surface.

The event and the shark acquired much local celebrity, with coverage on the local TV channel and regional papers. This was a most amazing and gratifying experience and who knows, maybe she will return to Cornwall next year and I will have the chance to photograph her again feeding in open water!



Picture details: Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, Tokina 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini TTL's, f8 @ 1/40
www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org

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Mark Webster is the author of 'The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography' and hosts regular live aboard workshops.

Do you have a nice shot with a short story behind it?

If so e mail me and yours could be the next "Parting shot".

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