

Shark Fin Soup

by Mark Webster

Underwater photographers are often prepared to spend small fortunes on travel to exotic overseas locations in search of unique images or exciting encounters. Most will tell you that the biggest adrenaline rush comes from being close to those larger denizens such as sharks, mantas or whales but these encounters often occur in very remote areas or might be unnatural feeding scenarios with crowds of other divers in the audience. If your budget does not stretch to Cocos, Galapagos, Ningaloo, the Azores or even a chumsicle in the Bahamas then you might be tempted to put the idea of meeting the big guys out of your mind. But all is not lost, we do have our own big creature encounters around the UK coastline, although their appearance may be seasonal and brief and conditions often less than ideal. In order to experience this you need to be a little flexible in your trip planning and leave your dive skin at home as you will be sampling the chilly waters of the Atlantic, English Channel or Irish Sea.

I am of course referring to the largest and perhaps most impressive fish in our waters - the basking shark. It is only recently that the basking shark has been recognised as a threatened species in UK waters and now enjoys fully protected status. For many years the sharks were hunted for the high quality oil from their livers and the number of shark sightings dwindled dramatically as a result. In 1998 their protection was announced and, as if in response to this, a huge number of sharks visited the waters of the south western approaches during that summer which prompted banner headlines in the



This is the classic basking shark approach shot and perhaps the most difficult. You need to drop into the water ahead of the shark and keep making adjustments to your position to ensure you intercept. Only put your head under the water at the last moment, particularly if the visibility is bad when a metre off track means a missed shot - Nikon F90X, 20mm, Subal housing, Elitechome EX, f5.6 @ 125th.

national press. Reports varied from 200 to 500 and more sharks on any given day, but whatever the actual number if you were anywhere between Lands End and Plymouth during those three weeks in May and June you could almost guarantee seeing several in a day. Sadly those numbers have yet to be repeated, reputedly due to the El Nino of the winter before, but you

can still confidently expect to see dozens of these beasts if you are in the right place at the right time and the experience of swimming with them is nothing short of magic.

Basking sharks are thought to be migratory, following the rich plankton blooms in temperate waters on which they feed. During the late winter the waters of the south west reach their lowest



The sharks will often veer off at the last moment until they get used to your presence. Be patient because when you get close the experience is awesome - Nikon F90X, 20mm, Elitechome EX, f11 @ 125th.

temperature which often results in the best visibility, but not a lot of fish activity due to the low food levels. As spring approaches the surface water temperature begins to warm slowly until the first period of extended sunshine, maybe only three or four days, which is the catalyst for an explosive growth of zooplankton. This generally occurs in early May and as soon as I hear complaints about the soupy vis in the local dive shop I know that the first sharks will not be far behind. The first sightings are generally in ones and twos and it can help a great deal to have a few reports from the local cove boat fishermen who often see them first whilst hauling their pots.

Although the sharks are seen on both the north and south coasts of the Cornish peninsula there are certain areas around Lands End and the Lizard where they will often congregate. These are broad shallow bays which the tidal flow will initially sweep the thick plankton soup into where it is then held until consumed or dies off. The sharks will often congregate in these bays and feed for several days which offers the opportunity for repeated encounters. At the beginning of these periods the

visibility is often appalling with the waters resembling deep green pea soup or the muddy waters of the Amazon basin. It is possible to shoot in these conditions, and you may well need to if your time is limited, but you need to get very close and use a very wide angle lens as the visibility will often be less than a metre. During May 2001 we enjoyed several days in Porthcurnow bay with more than 20 sharks on flat calm but very green waters.

Having tried various methods of attack I now feel that the best way to be personally equipped is to snorkel wearing a one piece wet suit with as little weight as possible. Scuba can be used if you have a shark feeding repeatedly in a very small area but generally it presents too much drag and you will soon be exhausted from your exertions. Most encounters are brief and require orchestrating by spotting your target shark from the boat and then slipping into the water ahead of it and watching the dorsal and tail fins swim towards you on the surface. You can then snorkel on an intercepting course until the shark bursts from the murk into your viewfinder. When feeding they will ignore you and veer off a metre or

two away and at this point you will need to put on a burst of speed to stay alongside briefly for a few head and tail shots. The plankton will often break up into patches and you can observe individual sharks cruising around the edges as they consume their own personal banquet. This behaviour presents perhaps the best opportunity to position yourself on the edge and wait for the shark to swim by you time and again.

The best photographs will be taken using natural light only - forget your flash as it will only produce monumental backscatter and be too unwieldy to move quickly on the surface. A wide angle lens is essential, either a 20mm or 17-35mm zoom for a housed system or a 15mm for a Nikonos. A fish eye lens can also be useful if the visibility is very poor, but then you must aim to get very close to your quarry. Even when the visibility is very poor horizontally in the water, there will still be plenty of light at the surface and even if you duck dive below a shark you will rarely reach more than a couple of metres depth. So load with 100 ASA or 200 ASA, set your shutter speed to 125th and meter the water below the surface and then perhaps open half a stop on the aperture - the sharks are grey and sometimes quite dark. Auto focus will often hunt on all the particles in the water, so fix your focus at a range that will fill the lens with shark, perhaps 1-1.5m, wait until the shark is sharp as it sweeps towards you, and then don't forget to bracket your exposures in all the excitement! If you have a housed system with motor drive then you have an advantage as you can shoot single frames quickly or set for slow continuous and you should get 4/5 frames per pass.

Cornwall is not the only location for reliable encounters with these impressive beasts. Dense concentrations of plankton also gather around the Isle of Man and attract large numbers of sharks throughout the early summer. The



Every now and then the sharks swallow and look a little more like their more carnivorous cousins. When a shark stops feeding to swallow they seem to become more aware of your presence and are likely to shy away - Nikon F90X, 20mm, Subal housing, Elitechome EX, f5.6 @ 125th.



When the sun shines the surface reflections give the sharks an attractive dappled appearance. Many of the sharks are 3-4m (12-15 ft) long, so shooting a side shot at a range of 1-1.5m with a 20mm will only capture half the fish in the frame - Nikon F90X, 20mm, Subal housing, Elitechome EX, f5.6 @ 125th.

most likely locations are on the west coast close to the port town of Peel. Here the annual visitation of the sharks is well known and is even used as a tourist attraction, with several boats available to go shark watching from the surface during the season. It is also here that the Basking Shark Society was first established and their website is

a good place to start for an update on the arrival of the first sharks of the season.

So dust off that wet suit and don't worry about getting cold as it is easy to raise a sweat even in chilly Atlantic waters when chasing these majestic denizens for the perfect picture.

Mark Webster

Basking Shark Society
Tel. 01624 801207 Fax.
01624 801046

The Basking Shark Society, Cronk Mooar, Curragh Road, St John's, Isle of Man. IM4 3LN

bskshark@enterprise.net

www.isle-of-man.com/interests/shark/society.html

In Cornwall the first sightings of the season will be posted on the website for the Porthkerris Diving Centre on the Lizard where you can also organise a boat to take you shark hunting.

www.porthkerrisdiver@demon.co.uk

For excursions around Lands End contact Bill Bowen at Mounts Bay Diving: 01736 752135.

Mark Webster hosts underwater photography workshops aboard the MY Coral Queen and is the author of 'The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography' published by Fountain Press.

See Mark's website for further details: www.photec.co.uk

The revolutionary Inon Quad strobe

Inons Quad Flash is an innovative new strobe that combines the build quality you expect from top end designers, while benefitting from lower manufacturing costs enabling the Quad to offer an outstanding specification at a surprisingly modest price.

The Quad uses four small flash tubes set at 90 degrees to assure even coverage. Naturally it is TTL compatible with Nikonos and most housed Nikon cameras. But the Quad also boasts important features for adding creativity to your shots including a choice of Full, Half and Quarter power for more subtle lighting than TTL which is often quite harsh. A nice feature is the built in rotating shade that allows you to mask off two of the flash tubes for adding shadows. There's also

a clip on diffuser to

soften the light further or for reducing power by an extra stop - giving Quad users a total of four manual power settings. A built in focusing light lets you see your subject and is automatically turned on when you activate the camera.

The Quad mounts to ports approximately 90mm in diameter including 105mm ports for the Nexus. Ocean Optics have manufactured special ports for Subal and Sea and Sea housings.

The Quad flash is threaded on the front to accept a dedicated wet lens that doubles the magnification of your camera lens. Even this bears the hallmark of Inons attention to detail -

it's actually a doublet meaning it has two elements. The doublet yields higher image quality.

The Quad has a mounting point for use with normal flashgun arms allowing it to be swung in and out of place rather than mounted directly to the port or for use as a conventional strobe. It uses Sea and Sea Nikonos fit TTL cables. Power is from 4 AA batteries.

The Inon Quad Flash is one of the most exciting additions to underwater lighting in a very long time.



Ocean Optics

13 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5AQ

Tel 0207 930 8408 Fax 0207 839 6148

<http://www.oceanoptics.co.uk>

UwP 37