

Great White Shark

by Julian Cohen

“Shark coming up on the bait fast from the right hand side” is the cry from Moth who is standing next to me and staring at the sea surface. He is pointing across me and I follow the line of his arm to see the huge dark shadow appear from the blue. Nothing can quite prepare you for your first sight of a Great White Shark. You may have seen photos, watched movies or National Geographic documentaries, but the first glimpse of this enormous animal in it's natural element, on a clear, calm sea with the sun shining above you, just makes your breath catch in your throat. It is just so much bigger than you ever thought it could be; and fast.

Along with three friends I am on The Princess II, a liveaboard in The Neptune Islands off the southern coast of Australia. The boat is run by Andrew Fox, the son of Rodney Fox, probably one of the most famous shark attack victims ever. He was attacked while spear fishing in his youth and miraculously survived. To hear him tell the story leaves me a little disturbed. The image he describes of seeing the teeth of the shark as it was coming up at him through a pool of his own blood will

never leave me. Incredibly he went on to become one of the shark's greatest protectors and many of the films and documentaries you may have seen have been made with his help. He is also an incredibly nice bloke. Andrew is the only operator in the world who runs a cage at the bottom as well as at the surface. Seeing these animals at a depth of twenty metres of water you feel that you have entered their habitat and it is a totally different experience to seeing them at the surface.

The shark appears to languidly move towards the bait, the head of a one and a half metre tuna tied to a rope that is being dangled from a small buoy off the back of the boat. It passes under the bait and then with one barely perceptible move of its tail it has done a complete one-eighty and suddenly all I can see is teeth. Johnsie, on the other end of the rope, pulls the bait in just at the

1/125 at f4. 12-24mm at 24mm. ISO 320. Nikon D200

1/160 at f6.3. 12-24mm at 17mm. ISO 160. Nikon D200





1/100 at f4. 12-24mm at 20mm. ISO 200. Nikon D200

right moment, and the shark bites air. It keeps biting, pursuing the bait as Johnsie pulls it smoothly towards the stern of the boat. The trick is not to feed the sharks, but to encourage them closer to the cage that is tied to the stern. Some of the sharks swim around the boat in large circles, passing tantalisingly close to the bait and appearing to ignore it completely. Then suddenly they will turn and try to grab it. Others, especially the smaller younger ones, and when I say small I am talking about three and a half metres, lunge and snap at the bait constantly. Johnsie has to stay alert to



1/125 at f4. 12-24mm at 24mm. ISO 320. Nikon D200

1/100 at f6.3. 12-24mm at 12mm. ISO 200. Nikon D200

avoid having to reload the line.

Time to get in the cage. Four divers jump in and stay as long as they can stand the cold. That can actually be quite a long time as when the sharks are active it is difficult to tear yourself away, no matter how numb you feel. I dropped into the water and after the initial gasp of breath as the cold hit me, I remembered to breathe and took my place in the cage and started to look around.





1/100 at f5. 12-24mm at 12mm. ISO 200. Nikon D200

About fifteen metres from me was a four and a half metre shark swimming slowly past the cage. Even though I had my camera rig in my hand I just stood and stared. I think the thing that surprised me most was how wide it was. Later I found out this shark was Curly, a male that is the shark equivalent of short and stout. He seemed to me to be at least a metre and a half in diameter at his widest part. As he opened his mouth to take the bait, one of the times Johnsie was caught napping, he just got wider and wider. I could easily have fit into his mouth and down his throat without touching the sides.

I got myself together and started to think about taking photos. I was shooting with ambient light only, no strobes, as there was plenty of light,



Rodney Fox

the cage was at the surface and I also wanted to make sure I wasn't taking too much gear into a small space to get banged around as the boat gently rocked in the bay. I worked on ISO 400 so that I could get the shutter speed to freeze the action. I was alone in the cage at this point as the other divers were doing a shift change. A very aggressive shark suddenly turned up. Rusty was over four metres long but not as wide as Curly. She had brown streak marks on her jaws from trying to thrust her head through the steel nets that the local fishermen use to hold the tuna. Tuna fishing and harvesting is the primary source of income in Port Lincoln, the nearest town. She came up from the deep in a classic Great White ambush attack, fast and nearly vertical. At the last moment Johnsie saw her coming and pulled the bait out of her reach. She nearly breached as she missed the bait and then turned to chase it. I was standing at the corner of the cage with both arms out holding the camera. Johnsie was pulling the bait towards the cage and the shark was following the bait. I started to pull my arms in as Johnsie pulled the bait clear of the water and Rusty slammed into the side of the cage. Fifteen

hundred kilos of shark was snapping at empty water about half a metre from my face. She clamped down on the edge of the cage where five seconds ago my camera had been and I stumbled backwards across the cage. Everything seemed to go into slow motion. I remember thinking to myself "Am I scared? No. Amazing! I'm not scared. Get the shot! Get the shot!" As I fell backwards I fired off three shots. Later I looked at my computer screen and saw the teeth that Rodney had seen. However in my case there was a steel cage between the teeth and me. I still don't know how Rodney can sleep at night.

Over the thirty five years that Andrew has been coming to The Neptune Islands, he and his father have been tagging and trying to identify the sharks to study their behaviour. Many sharks come back again and again to the Islands, often at the same time of the year. The favourite time is seal calving time when the Australian Fur Seal pups are learning to swim and have to do it in a sea that is literally packed with Great White sharks. We saw eleven different sharks on our four day trip, and we didn't move out of the bay, but stayed moored up the whole time.

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