

Snorkelling with Basking Sharks

by Charles Hood

The filter feeding *Cetorhinus maximus* or to give it its common name the basking shark is the second largest fish in all of the worlds oceans, narrowly beaten by the whale shark *Rhincodon typus*. However, lengthwise there is very little in it. Apparently the largest recorded basking shark was found in a herring net in the Bay of Fundy, Canada in 1851 and measured a whopping 12.27 metres. Compare this with the largest confirmed whale shark that was caught near Baba Island, Karachi, Pakistan on November 11, 1947 which at 12.65 metres is less than half a metre longer. So to all intents and purposes they are similar in length and are both very big fish. The main difference, however, is I can relatively easily swim with basking sharks as they congregate, sometimes in vast numbers, less than 10 miles from my home in south west Cornwall, England, whereas to see a whale shark I have to travel thousands of miles.

Historically each year the first individuals start to appear off the very southwest tip of England around late April to mid May depending upon

the weather conditions. Probably extremely hungry, after the winter lean period they then build in numbers urged on by the desire to gorge themselves on the spring plankton bloom. From then on they appear to choose their favourite spots to harvest the tiny critters and will often remain in the same vicinity for weeks on end until towards mid summer when they start to disperse. Some individuals make their way up the English Channel in search of the moving plankton bloom and can be seen as far eastwards as Weymouth. However, the majority tend to break up in to smaller groups and meander up the north coast of Cornwall travelling up to Lundy, the Isle of Man then appear to meet up again on the west coast of Scotland by late summer. This pattern is the norm, however, with our ever-changing climate they don't necessarily read the script.

In both 2007 and 2008 the weather in June and for most of July was some of the worst in living memory, while in late summer it was positively Caribbean like. The sharks weren't seen in reasonable numbers



in both years until August when they congregated in stupendous numbers with reports of over 400 individuals between Land's End and the Lizard peninsular. One particular day in early September 2008 I estimate we saw at least 100 and maybe more. They were all confined to within less than a square mile of the Longships lighthouse just off Land's End and were totally focussed on feeding themselves full in the plankton rich waters. As far as you could see in any direction were fins, snouts and tails breaking the surface – one of nature's true spectacles?

In 2009 and 2010 we saw the return to the usual format with mid June proving to be the sweet spot. 2009 was the first year that we operated commercially with our 7 metre RIB called Logan and we made two minutes on the BBC national news by the end of our the first week thanks to the hard work of underwater cameraman Dan Burton. John McIntyre then went on to produce a short film for BBC Worldwide news and many UK photographers that year achieved some excellent images. Building on our 2009 success we were fully booked this year and what a year it was. From memory it was the very best season to photograph basking sharks. Perhaps there weren't the huge numbers that we had in the previous seasons but the sharks we had were real players. The highlight was filming with Paul Rose for the new BBC Oceans series to be broadcast next spring. In all my time of venturing out with basking sharks I have never heard a photographer say, and I quote, 'that's it, I've got all the footage I require', which came from BBC cameraman Mike Pitts after being in the water surrounded by 7 real players for over 5 hours. Other honourable guests included, all the way from Hawaii, the internationally recognised



Photo by Alex Mustard

underwater photographer Doug Perrine who finally nailed the shot he wanted for his new book, Alex Mustard complete with the largest dome port in the world, which resulted in the most glorious of split images I think that have ever been taken of said fish, Maria Munn with a team of compact camera users who's total equipment could all fit in one Peli case, Frogfish photography who snapped some awesome close-ups of wide mouths gaping open, Divelife with simply the most stunning of kelpy shallow water shots and of course, last but by no means least, the editor of UWP, Monsieur Rowlands. Peter chose to remain topside videoing proceedings and he has the best audio sound of a breaching basking shark ever recorded, complete with expletives. No really, it is truly magnificent. The only problem was the lens was pointing in completely the opposite direction to where the breach was taking place so sadly there isn't the imagery to accompany it!

So how do you photograph England's most wonderful elasmobranch? First you have to find yourself someone who can get you in front of them. And when I mean in front of them, in front of them



in a way that will present the best opportunity for you to get the images you are after. Simply steaming up to a small group of basking sharks and leaping in will, nine times out of 10, result at best in a gloomy tail shot. Further that operator has also got to be able to find them, which despite being gigantic leviathans is not as easy as it may first appear. The signature of the basking shark is the tip of the dorsal breaking the surface in the classic Jaws-like fashion. But sometimes only the very tiniest of tip may be breaking the surface and spotting them can be a practiced art. Also with around 30 miles of coastline to search each time they can be very elusive. Thus the only reliable method is to set up a

network of spotters. These are usually a combination of local fishermen, volunteer coast guard watches, angling boats and various tourist vessels. And the information flow is a two-way affair so everyone benefits.

So once we have established where they might be what is the best photographic system to choose? Personally I prefer a fixed focal length lens on a housed dSLR. Rather than a zoom a fixed focal length lens gives you one less thing to think about, which when snapping unpredictable fish such as basking sharks is a good thing. So I usually opt for the compact Nikkor 20mm f2.8 on my Nikon D3. On a smaller chip camera something that gives you around 90 degrees would be perfect; I hear the Tokina 10-17mm is a popular choice at the 17mm end although a Nikkor 16mm would also work. Fish-eyes can be used if the water is murky but they tend to distort the animal too much for my liking. Exposure wise, I personally now set the D3 to matrix metering, in program mode and with continuous auto focus. My reasoning is that Nikon has spent a huge amount of time, money and research on these modes and I've found they all are absolutely spot on. You do, however, need to give the camera a helping hand by invoking the active D lighting so as to clip any highlights and dial in around minus 2/3 – 1 1/3 stops, as



it will tend to overexpose. I shoot at either ISO 800 or even 1600 because the D3's chip can take it and this usually gives an exposure of around 1/320s at f8. Anything below 1/125s and you will almost certainly get camera shake and anything wider than f8 on full frame and the depth of field will be limited. So now you have all the knowledge what's the best technique?

Planning is paramount. All ones gear must be assembled and ready to go before you spot the sharks, in this way getting in the right position should be the only issue on ones mind rather than assembling cameras housings or making up weight

belts for instance. I always suggest observing the sharks for at least five to 10 minutes to establish if there is a pattern to their feeding. Usually they will tend to circle around a concentrated patch of plankton and this presents the best opportunity, as you will be able to predict where they will be. We then usually drop in as quietly as possible, torpedo-like 'Mustard style', works well, around 100 metres away and swim to there predicted route lining up on a sharks dorsal fin about 20 metres distant. 'Mustard style', refers to Alex's stealth like head first entry he adopted, although gently lowering yourself feet first is perfectly acceptable. The secret



then is to 'make like a jellyfish' i.e. just float as motionless as possible on the surface. This way the sharks will usually ignore you and swim right passed with mouths agape. If you dangle you legs down or try and swim towards them they will usually turn away and close their mouths. Under no circumstances should you try and grab hold of them or try and snorkel down under them. Besides being possibly an illegal activity they will instantly react by swimming off at considerable speed with the possible result in you receiving a nasty tail slap, which from something weighing upwards of 10 tons would probably ruin your afternoon. If you remain



tail and stallion (a certain male with particularly large claspers). Sadly on June 28th we saw the last one for the season. Several large sharks have been reported since but they were nearly all offshore and difficult to photograph underwater so we will have to wait again until next year.

Basking sharks are a protected species in UK waters and it is an offence to cause them harm so we always suggest one follows a set of guidelines adopted from the Shark Trust and Marine Conservation Society. The main points are stopping the boat around 100 metres away, restricting the numbers of snorkellers at any one time in the water to a maximum of four, not touching or crowding the sharks and no flash photography.

There are a small number of operators in the UK who will by prior arrangement take you out to photograph basking sharks, however, we have arguably the best conditions with usually pretty much blue water and great visibility. If you are interested in chartering our rib please then please visit www.riblogan.com for more details.

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