

Scottish Basking Sharks

by Dan Bolt

‘They’ say that every cloud has a silver lining. And so it was for me when just a few weeks after having to cancel a Maldives liveaboard holiday due to illness, I was able to fill a cancellation-space on a trip to the Scottish island of Mull to spend a week snorkelling with basking sharks. In actual fact the cloud’s lining turned out to be made of gold rather than silver because the trip in question was being attended by my friend and all round photographic genius Alex Mustard.

Not re-booking the Maldives holiday was, for me, an easy choice to make as I personally think there are greater opportunities for original and captivating images in cold water marine-systems than there are in many warm water ones. I would love to know how many 100’s (or 1000’s?) of photographers visit the Maldives annually compared to the 50 or so spaces available each year during the 10 weeks that the Mull based is available for.

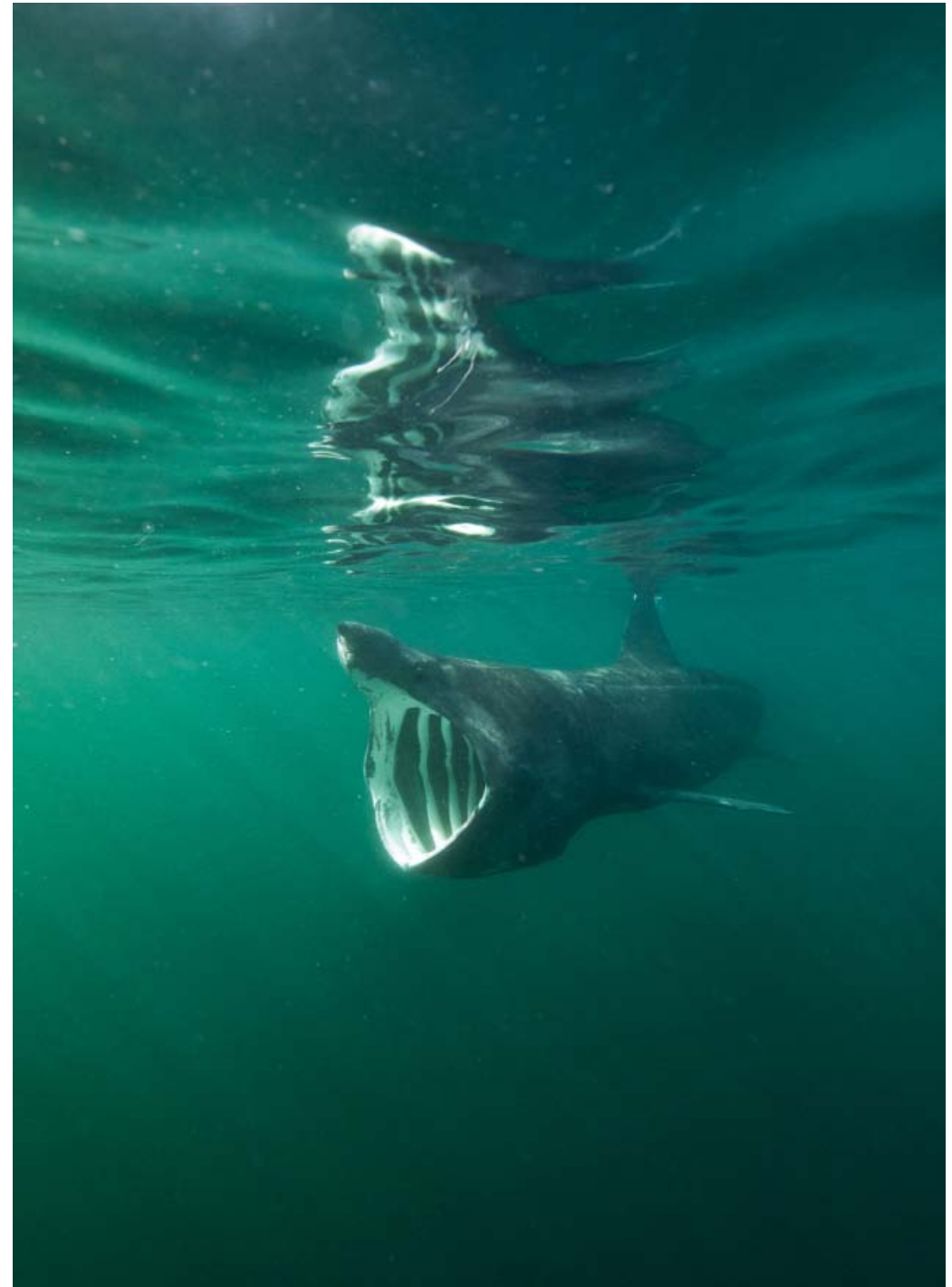
As well as Alex and his girlfriend Eleo, I was accompanied by my regular buddy Terry Griffiths and two other divers from Northern Ireland and the north of England. Making

up the numbers on the boat were the trip organiser Mark Harding, captain Jimbo and various other crew-members during the week.

Mark runs a travel firm called Acuatours and had put this package together to make the most of such an amazing destination. Our accommodation was in the pretty town of Tobermory in a self-catering cottage overlooking the picturesque harbour, an easy 3min car journey to make each morning. The boat for the week was the 9m long Sula Crion which is operated by wildlife watching specialists Sea Life Surveys. When not taking snorkelers out to see basking sharks, the Sula Crion normally takes tourists on short trips to see the seals, dolphins, whales and sea-birds that frequent these cool, rich waters.

The ultimate purpose of the week was obviously to snorkel with the 2nd largest fish in the world and

The calmest water we had all week allowed for some reflections. Olympus E-PL1, 9-18@9mm, f/7.1, 1/100th, iso400





Sula Crion at dusk. Fuji X-S1. f/11, 1.6sec, iso100

only a matter of minutes until we saw that first glimpse heading at us out of the gloom and what an experience! No matter how much you tell yourself that this is a benign, filter feeding shark, it is still a shark none-the-less and a bloody big one too - so that first encounter is a heart-stopping moment when the enormous white mouth looms out of the plankton filled water heading straight towards you.

That first encounter actually turned into a frenzy of shark sightings over the next few hours with everyone on the boat getting some great passes and bagging lots of superb images. It may be useful to know that this May/June/July period was one of the wettest, and dullest, on record in the UK and it was with no small amount of glee that we greeted the sun as it made an appearance late into this first afternoon.

Getting good images of basking sharks is actually quite simple, and being in the right place at the right time (and behaving appropriately) will



Home for the night, the Cairns of Coll. Fuji X-S1. f/5.6, 1/340th, iso200

do the job on most occasions. Alex had briefed us about the best way to pre-set our camera so all we had to do was get into position. A shark's day consists mainly of swimming through the shallows filter-feeding with their mouths wide open, occasionally swallowing, and then feeding some more. So the difference between a good photo and a great photo is often down to the conditions you're shooting in, and to have the sun shining through relatively calm waters late in the afternoon was just about perfect to make the subject really come alive in our viewfinders.

Being so far north and just a few days off the summer solstice meant that it was light until 11 o'clock at night and we were still shooting the sharks well past 8 o'clock that evening. And because the sun had decided to stay out, we decided not to return to Mull but instead to camp on a small island amongst a group called the Cairns of Coll. A more peaceful and idyllic end to such an amazing



A fairly big 7m shark. Olympus E-PL1, 9-18@9mm, f/9.0, 1/125th, iso400

day we could not have asked for, with the local seal population providing a backdrop of inquisitive faces just off the beach.

The Cairns of Coll are a superb snorkelling destination in their own right, with both common and gray seals (though neither are very used to divers so there was no fin nibbling going on), sea-grass beds, nudibranchs, starfish, jellyfish and plenty of anemones too. The opportunity arose later



The classic basker pose. Olympus E-PL1, 9-18@9mm, f/8.0, 1/100th, iso400

in the week to swim around the granite outcrops, over the white sand and through the tall sea-weeds and we accepted willingly. Given a sunny day with good vis this spot would definitely have produced some cracking wide-angle images, but with the overcast skies that we had I was glad to have on my trusty 12-50mm (on an Olympus E-PL1) with subsea +10 diopetre for the nudibranchs and smaller critters.

Unfortunately that first afternoon and few hours of the next morning was the last we would see of the sun for the rest of the week, but happily the same was not true of the sharks. They just kept coming and coming. In all we reckon to have seen over 40 individuals that week and had multiple passes every day giving us all ample opportunity for photography, and plenty of time to just enjoy the encounters for the real privilege they were.

At this time of year the water temperature ranges between 10 and 14 degrees and we had



Breach! Fuji X-S1. f/6.4, 1/1600th, iso200

it relatively warm at 12 degrees. I was a little apprehensive that attempting this kind of activity in for a week in a wetsuit might have shortened the time I was able to spend in the water due to the energy sapping nature of the cold. But even though the weather was not kind to us with plenty of rain and some fairly strong winds, the advantage I gained in the water over the other folks in their drysuits was well worth the odd shiver and those horrible moments when you put on a cold, wet wetsuit. That advantage came from the ease of movement and ability to quickly get in to position ahead of a 'player' and was a real bonus. Being able to swim between individual sharks rather than waiting for the boat to pick me up & drop me off meant that I was able to get one or two passes to myself before the other snorkelers were dropped back in again.

I said earlier that basking sharks tend to just swim and eat, swim and eat. While that is true



Dr. Planktonstein goes fishing. Fuji X-S1. f/4.5, 1/850th, iso200



Tobermory as seen from the accommodation. Fuji X-S1. f/6.4, 1/800th, iso640



Common seal. Fuji X-S1. f/5.6, 1/500th, iso200



Lions mane jellyfish. Olympus E-PL1, 9-18@12mm, f/6.3, 1/125th, iso500, 1xYS-02



Polycera quadrilineata. Olympus E-PL1, 12-50mm@50mm, f/14, 1/160th, iso200, 2xYS-110a



Sunset on the Cairns of Coll. Fuji X-S1. f/5.6, 1/160th, iso200

for 99% of the time, they also do something totally out of character for such a large, seemingly docile fish: breach. It wasn't until just a few years ago that science started to believe the fishermen's tales of giant sharks leaping out of the water, and even today no one understands why they do choose to launch themselves clear of the surface. But boy is it an impressive sight to witness and we saw a breach on four out of the five days during this trip with each shark breaching at least twice.

There are few images of a

breaching basking shark in existence and it became some-what of a game on the boat when a breach was spotted to scrabble around for our top-side cameras and get ready for the second jump just a few seconds later, normally to end in failure for not being ready or simply aiming cameras in the wrong direction. On the penultimate day my friend Terry was on standing the bow of the Sula Crion looking for sharks and spotted a breach about 100m from the boat. We were already photographing sea-birds so the game was on to guess where the

shark was going to appear next and be ready! I am happy to say that my plan to pre-focus and setting my lens fairly wide paid off. I was lucky enough to grab 3 frames before the shark disappeared behind a mountain of water at it belly-flopped back into the sea - simply one of the most amazing things I have ever witnessed.

As all good things must come to an end so it was that we reached the end of the week and it was time to pack up and head off to the mainland. We had planned a couple of dives in the Sea Lochs of western Scotland

after the week based on Mull which meant getting the first ferry off the island at 0630 the next morning. In hindsight we should have planned an extra day or two either side of the holiday to explore the stunning scenery to be found on the island with it's mountainous centre and golden-white sandy beaches, and even go on wildlife excursions to photograph otters or sea eagles.

Dan Bolt

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