

Shark photography

with Chris Knight

From a very young age I was fascinated by animals and was always reading wildlife books or glued to the TV watching wildlife documentaries.

When I was about 10 years old I watched the original Jaws film. After the nightmares faded (I'm joking) I was left intrigued and fascinated by sharks. I know that these films were enough to put some people off of going in the sea for life but I was left thinking wow – wouldn't it be cool to see a Great White one day.

My parents also helped as they knew that Jaws didn't necessarily portray sharks as they really were so they brought me a book "Great Shark Stories" by Ron and Valerie Taylor who were very famous for their work on sharks and contributed massively towards the films in terms of the real footage that was used and how the animators needed to design the shark for the films.

In August 2010 I took myself off to Cape Town in South Africa. While there I took an introduction to Scuba Diving course and booked myself on to a Great White cage diving trip. The trip ran out to Dyer Island and shark alley which is world famous as being one of if not the biggest Great White

hotspots in the world. Unfortunately, I didn't do my homework and went out of season which meant after a very long drive and a long day at sea I still hadn't seen a Great White.

Upon my return to the dive shop my instructor asked me how it was. He could see the disappointment on my face when I told him I didn't see one so he made a suggestion. He said finish my Open Water dive certification as I was half way there with the introduction course that I did which was a pre requirement to go cage diving. When I had completed my course he presented me with my certificate and told me to go to the Waterfront Aquarium and ask for one of his friends and said that he had a surprise for me.

I turned up and found the guy I needed to speak to who then took me off to a cupboard to find me some dive gear. When I asked him where we were diving he replied "I'm putting you in the main tank with the Ragged Tooth sharks!". I'm not going to lie – I was a bit nervous but was also grinning from ear to ear at the same time. He briefed me on how to behave and what to look out for and we dropped in. From that moment I knew



Great White – Shot in Guadalupe Island (Mexico) small volcanic island located in the Pacific 150 miles off the west coast of Mexico's Baja California peninsula, Sept 2014 Sony RX100 MK2 (compact) in nauticam housing & UWL 04 fish eye

it wouldn't be my last shark dive, I was hooked!

My interest in photography began when I took a mixed Art & Design course at East Berkshire Collage (BTEC National Diploma) where I was able to specialize in the subject in my second year.

After graduating, my work path changed direction and I moved to Germany to pursue a career in television.

Upon my return I worked part time as a journalist & photographer for Wakeboard Magazine and also

wrote and shot pictures for the occasional water sports article in university magazines and restaurant reviews in the local papers. Apart from this my photography remained mostly a hobby where I would try to shoot when I could.

After gaining qualifications as a PADI Divemaster and an Advanced Diploma in Marine Zoology my journey in to shark diving and underwater photography began. From then on I spent my spare time travelling to spectacular diving locations and volunteering

for different marine organizations such as White Shark Projects in South Africa and the Whale Shark Research Programme in the Maldives.

There are many research projects available today where you actually pay to volunteer however most of your money goes towards your food, accommodation and the paperwork to get you set up, any money left over goes in to the organization that you are volunteering for. I found that this is a great way to spend time with, learn about and photograph the animals that you are interested in. Although you will live in very basic accommodation and have to work it is a considerably cheaper way to do it as compared to paying a large amount of money for say a tailored shark diving holiday.

My first project was with White Shark Projects in South Africa. Due to my severe lack of Great Whites on the previous trip, I did my research and joined this organization for 3 weeks in peak shark season. I was responsible for packing the boat with bait, wetsuits, safety equipment and packed lunches for the customers. While out at sea I would help to spot sharks and record information on the sex, size, amount of sharks and the sea and weather conditions that formed a large part of their data for their research. I would also brief the paying customers and help them in and out of the cages.

During the 3 weeks there were only 4 days that we couldn't go to sea due to bad weather however on every day we went to sea we saw so many Great Whites that I was overwhelmed and extremely satisfied and totally forgot about my previous unlucky day trip.

My second project was with the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme. It was similar to the last one however there were no paying customers to take out, just a group of 10 volunteers



Whale Sharks – Shot Isla Mujeres in the Caribbean Sea just off the coast of Mexico. June 2015. Sony RX100 MK2 (compact) in nauticam housing & UWL 04 fish eye

finding whale sharks and collecting data. When we found them we would dive in and measure them with tape measures and also a camera system with two laser pointers which would use an algorithm to work out the size of the animal by measuring the pixels between the 2 dots in photoshop.

Again we had to pay to volunteer and lived in simple accommodation but was a hugely cheaper way to spend that amount of time with these amazing animals and in a beautiful place like the Maldives.

On both of these trips we would use a camera to record pictures of the sharks for identification purposes which was something that I really enjoyed and fed my interest on underwater photography. Great Whites can be identified by the patterns and notches on their dorsal fins and whale sharks could be identified by the spot markings they have on their sides just behind their gills.

A few years ago I met Shark Expert “Eli



Whale Sharks – Shot Isla Mujeres in the Caribbean Sea just off the coast of Mexico. June 2015. Sony RX100 MK2 (compact) in nauticam housing & UWL 04 fish eye

Martinez”, he set up Shark Diver Magazine which used to run as a printed publication. Through the magazine he started running expeditions to dive with the large predatory species of sharks in the best places in the world to see them. Due to the success



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Blue Shark – Shot in San Diego, Sept 2014. Sony RX100 MK2 (compact) in Nauticam housing & UWL 04 fish eye

of the expeditions the magazine faded out but Eli still continues to educate people on sharks through his expeditions, school / community talks and the television programs that feature him and his work. Under Eli's guidance and education these trips are designed to give you the chance to dive with these sharks face to face and without the use of cages. Unfortunately, due to government rules he is not allowed to run trips to dive with Great whites without the use of cages but hopes to one day if the rules are changed.

As well as sharks he runs trips to dive with other great ocean dwellers such as, whales, mantas, whale sharks and belugas. He was also one

of the first people to set up diving expeditions which allowed you in the water with crocodiles without the use of cages. If you thought shark diving was crazy, then you must try the crocodiles! – more about this in the next issue!

I have been a regular on his trips over the last four years and these excursions have enabled me to learn a lot about many species of marine animals whilst also enhancing my skills as an underwater photographer.

My underwater images have won a few competitions on Viewbug and I have had some of my work featured in calendars, articles and websites of different Marine Science Charities & Organizations such as: sharks4kids.



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Great Hammerhead Sharks – Shot in Bimini – Bahamas Feb 2016 Canon 5D MK2, Lens: Canon 8-15mm f4 L Fish Eye Aquatica housing

com (Sharky education for kids and teachers), earthtouchnews.com (earth touch news network) and marinecsi.org (marine conservation science institute).

I have also recently started a partnership with the Sea Changers

Charity www.sea-changers.org.uk as an associated photographer and will be supplying images and writing blogs about the importance of our UK marine life to help promote the good work that they do.

www.sea-changers.org.uk

www.uwpmag.com

Sharks in the UK

Some people might be surprised to know that the UK has around 21 species of shark that reside in our waters all year round and also a handful of others that come to visit us during the warmer months.

The residential sharks are mainly smaller species such as the Catsharks, Dogfish and Skates. Although very important to our ecosystem and quite impressive in their own way, they struggle to live up to the fearsome and awe inspiring reputation of their larger relatives.

Two of the more impressive sharks that frequent our waters are the Blue Shark and the Basking Shark.

The Blue Shark (*Prionace glauca*) are pelagic, oceanic sharks which are widespread in temperate and tropical waters down to 600m. It is easy to see where this shark got its name, having a rich cobalt blue upper body with the colour fading down to a white underbelly. A mature adult can reach a maximum size of around 3.5 meters.

These sharks are highly migratory and normally live in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, but stray into UK waters to feed on our large stocks of mackerel and other prey. They are generally found in the slightly warmer waters of the south west of England, Ireland and Wales, although they occasionally turn up elsewhere and have been sighted as far up as the north of the British Isles.

The best time to see them is generally from late June through to mid-October with West Cornwall probably being the best place to see them, as the water clarity is normally pretty good with typical visibility of around 8-20 metres.

There are a few companies in the UK that

run trips out to see them. Some only offer a cage experience and others will let you snorkel with them. If you search the internet for Blue Shark Diving UK it will provide you with a list of tour operators. Some that you may want to check out are:

www.charleshood.com

&

www.atlanticdiver.co.uk

The Basking Shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*) shark is a coastal-pelagic shark found worldwide in cold to warm-temperate waters. These large brown filter feeding sharks can reach lengths of up to 12m, they are the largest fish in British waters and the second largest in the world after the Whale Shark (*Rhincodon typus*). They can often be found at the surface where they feed on plankton blooms but are known to dive to depths of at least 900 meters. Despite their size, surprisingly little is known about them, partly because of the difficulty of conducting field research on an animal which spends most of its life out of sight, deep underwater.

Luckily for us these gentle giants appear in our coastal waters from around May until late October and can generally be found all along the west coast of the UK,

A number of locations have been recognised as Basking Shark hotspots such as: Southwest England (Devon, Cornwall, Scilly), Malin Head (Ireland), Isle of Man and the Scottish Hebrides (Skye, Mull & Coll). Sightings in the south are becoming rarer with the main congregation showing up further north in the Scottish Hebrides.

It is worth searching the internet to look for tour operators in the different areas, however



I can say from personal experience that www.baskingsharkscotland.co.uk is certainly worth a look. They run week long trips based out of the Isle of Coll in Scotland from late July to early August. These longer trips ensure you get plenty of time in the water with the Sharks and also the chance to see some of the other diverse marine wildlife that the area has to offer such as puffins, seals, jellyfish and whales.

www.baskingsharkscotland.co.uk



What is your favorite thing about working with sharks?

The more I dive with sharks the more I learn and the more it feeds my fascination with these amazing animals. I have to say that when you are within arms reach of a 4 meter shark that could kill you in the blink of an eye, it is a pretty amazing feeling.

It's obvious when you are next to them why they are Apex predators, they are so streamlined, powerful and well adapted to the marine environment. They gracefully glide through the water with no effort as they come over to check you out and see what you are doing in their

back yard. As I mentioned, I have been lucky enough to dive with many species of sharks all over the world and not once has any of them shown any aggression towards me. They simply come check me out and then go about their business.

What's something you hope people take away from your photographs?

As my experience with sharks and photography grows I have been lucky enough to capture some stunning images. I really hope that people who don't know much about sharks or who are not particularly in to them see my images and something



Basking Sharks - shot off the Isle of Coll (Southern Hebrides) Scotland Sept 2015

Sony RX100 MK2 (compact) in nauticam housing & UWL 04 fish eye

inside them says "Wow" that is a beautiful and amazing creature. I think it is important for people to be more aware and educated about sharks these days as overfishing and shark finning has driven some species close to extinction. I also want people to know that I had to get in the water with that shark to catch that image and yes I'm still alive. I can say for sure that they are definitely not the mindless killers that some people believe them to be!



What advice would you give to someone that wanted to start photographing sharks?

First of all, I would say that if they have no shark experience then they should go on a trip with a dive shop / group that can teach them the procedure and also keep an eye on them! Other than that there is a lot of information that can be found on the internet by looking at shark conservation websites, shark diving trip providers, their relevant youtube channels, shark specialist blogs, in books and on television documentaries.

However, If you do find yourself face to face with a shark there are a few key things to think about, such as:

You are always much safer scuba diving with sharks rather than swimming or snorkeling. The latter can be done but only with experience. A shark can see you very well when you are under water and is less likely to mistake you as a meal. A lot of sharks strike from below and when they look up at the surface and see your silhouette they can sometimes confuse it for prey.

Always dive with a buddy! you need to keep your eyes open and know where the shark or sharks are at all times (they can tell when you are not looking!). When diving with a buddy you can look out and point out the sharks to each other, and of course if something were to go wrong then they can help.

Never dive or snorkel in a known shark area at sunrise, sunset, where fresh water meets the sea such as a river mouth or while you or anyone else is fishing or spear fishing! In low light and murky water, the shark can't see what you are that well and a shark can sense the electrical signal given off by a dying fish and also detect its blood from very far away! These could all confuse the shark which could lead to it taking a bite out of you instead!

If a shark does come close enough for you to touch it then do reach out and give it a gentle nudge, not a punch! Seeing as they are Apex predators it is very rare that any other animals will touch them so by you giving them a small nudge they realize that you are something that they should be wary of. Never punch a shark hard as it is not fair on them and you don't want to upset it!

The only exception to this rule is if the shark has part of you in its mouth then please do punch it as hard as you can. The best place to do this would be on the end of its nose as this is its most sensitive part. If this is not possible then the eye or the gills are the next best place to do it.

Believe it or not we are generally not on the menu and if a shark was to bite you it will normally let you go as soon as it tastes that you are human.

Chris Knight
www.knightpics.co.uk



Great White – Shot in Guadalupe Island (Mexico) small volcanic island located in the Pacific 150 miles off the west coast of Mexico's Baja California peninsula, Sept 2014. Sony RX100 MK2 (compact) in nauticam housing & UWL 04 fish eye. This photo of the shark leaving is the photo that has done the best for me in terms of getting me recognised. It won a competition called tails on viewbug and was featured in the marine conservation science institute calender 2016 and numerous online articles. This also made me think how cool it would look on a tshirt. This image was eventually converted in to a logo and shark inspired was born. I made the company hoping to make shark related designs on quality clothing and give part of the proceeds to a shark charity – I chose the shark trust and have now been up and running and working with them for a couple of months now with £3 from every item I sell going direct to the charity.

www.sharkinspired.com

Clothing is currently on sale via the shark trust charity shop

<https://shop.sharktrust.org/collections/shark-inspired>

To keep up to date with what's going on - please like the Facebook page

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Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter No
White Balance



Digital - No Filter Manual
White Balance



Magic Filter Manual
White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

www.magic-filters.com