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Shark tales



Despite some two million sharks in Maritime waters, swimmers have little to fear

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SHARK Attacks

ATTACKS IN THE MARITIMES

● **JUNE 1920: Hubbards Cove** — Fishermen harpooning tuna inadvertently harpoon a large shark, which turns and attacks the harpooner's boat, sending one of the men into the water. He manages to get back aboard as the shark bears down on him and, fearing exposure, the men cut the line still attached to the shark and head shoreward. A tooth found in the boat, which was later lost, implicates a great white shark.

● **JULY 1932: Digby Gut** — A fisherman and his son watch a shark circle a boat a half-kilometre away while overhauling their fishing trawl. Without warning, the shark attacks their boat, lifting it up and biting its way down the side. Both fisherman and son survive and, upon reaching shore, find the boat's propeller blades bent and teeth embedded in the keel. The teeth were positively identified as those of a great white shark. One tooth is now at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History in Halifax.

● **JULY 1953: Forchu, Cape Breton** — The dory of two lobster fishermen is strangely stalked for almost a week by a large shark as it leaves the harbour each day. On July 9, the shark charges, smashing its head through the bottom of the boat, creating a 20-centimetre hole in the vessel. The shark disappears while the boat sinks. One man clings to the hull and is rescued; the other drowns.

● **DECEMBER 2000: Digby** — A sea urchin diver is submerged long enough to harvest half a dozen urchins when something bumps into his side. He turns to face a three-metre shark biting the urchin-filled bag. The shark traps the diver's fingers in the bag and begins to drag him out to sea. After shaking the bag, the shark lets go and the diver goes to the surface, where he is continually harassed by the shark. He makes it to shore unharmed, and continues to dive the next day. Experts conclude by the diver's description that the shark was a porbeagle.

● **SUMMER 2004: Off the Nova Scotia coast** — During a shark-fishing tournament, a blue shark is caught and pulled into the boat, where a 14-year-old boy tries to imitate a stunt he has seen on the Discovery Channel. He puts his hand on the shark's snout, expecting the shark to go into a catatonic state. The shark immediately bites the boy, who receives stitches for minor lacerations.

Boats bear brunt

'In Atlantic Canada, you are more likely to get hit in the head by a coconut than get bitten by a shark'

By Joe Fitzgerald — Special to The Daily News

On a crisp, calm Monday morning in December 2000, Daniel MacDonald plunged into the Bay of Fundy, the first commercial urchin diver in the water that day. At a depth of about 15 metres, MacDonald had managed to collect half a dozen of the spiny delicacies when something rammed into his side.

When MacDonald spun to see what had hit him, he stared into the face of a three-metre shark, which was shaking and tearing apart the bag of urchins attached to MacDonald's belt.

"My hand was locked in the bag, I couldn't let go of it," says MacDonald, "so when he took off with the bag, I was basically riding the shark."

After dragging MacDonald for a short distance, the shark let go of the bag, and MacDonald rose to the surface. While he swam to shore, the shark darted back and forth around him, MacDonald keeping him at bay by hitting him with his fishing bag.

Not seriously injured, MacDonald returned to the water the next day. He says he had encountered sharks before, but none exhibited the behaviour of this particular shark.

"They're inquisitive; they come around you, then they take off," says MacDonald.

"Before we got into the water, there were about seven or eight boats there laying traps."

In that area at that time of year, lobster fishermen set traps on Mondays with nearly seven kilograms of fresh bait inside each.

"Basically, there was a lot of chum in the water," MacDonald says.

As to why this shark was so bold, MacDonald believes it was just a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I think, because of all the bait in the water, it made him more aggressive than he ever would have been," he says.

MacDonald's descriptions of his encounter led most experts to conclude his attacker was a porbeagle shark, common to these waters year-round, and one of the many species of shark that inhabit waters around the Maritimes. Not known as a man-eater, the porbeagle is a relative of more dangerous sharks, such as the mako and great white.

"The porbeagle is the best candidate for a true Canadian shark," says Steve Campana, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans shark expert and head of the Canadian Shark Research Laboratory at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography.

Campana estimates that up to two million sharks prowl Canadian Maritime waters in the summer. The bulk are small sharks, such as the spiny dogfish, common but more likely to be encountered on an introductory biology course dissection table than in the ocean. Species range from the huge and harmless filter-feeding basking shark to the infamous great white.

And while there has never been a documented shark attack on a swimmer or surfer in the Maritimes, attacks on boats have occurred throughout the last century.

On June 27, 1920, 6½ kilometres off Hubbards



BIG JAWS: Several species of shark prowl the waters around the Maritimes, among them the sinister-looking mako. This 3.25-metre, 429-kilogram mako caught off Brier Island last September was a Canadian record.

Cove, Jeremiah Harnish and John Chandler were hunting tuna when Harnish harpooned what he thought was a large specimen of the valued fish. The two men got into a small boat to give the tuna line to play itself and drown. It was then that Harnish and Chandler realized the fish was not diving like a tuna normally would. Instead, the giant fish surfaced, abruptly turned and charged the aft of the boat, directly where Chandler was standing.

The boat was knocked out from under Chandler, and he went head first overboard. When Chandler surfaced, he was about five metres from the boat, which was in the jaws of a shark, not a tuna. A good swimmer, Chandler made it to the boat and was helped aboard by Harnish before the shark could attack him. They cut the line still attached to shark and Walter Winters, the man operating the motor boat, took the two men from the row boat and hurried full speed for Hubbards.

In July 1932, about 16 kilometres northwest of

Digby Gut, Wilson Munroe and his young son stopped to overhaul their fishing trawl in their 7.6 metre motorboat. They noticed a shark circling another boat about a half-kilometre away, then, without warning or provocation, Munroe's boat was lifted on the starboard side, pushing it down aft and slopping water over the port quarter gunnel. Munroe and his son managed to stay aboard while something bumped its way down the boat under the starboard bilge until it got clear. Neither saw their attacker.

When the Munroes reached shore and examined the boat, they found the propeller blades bent and teeth embedded in the keel. One was positively identified as a great white shark tooth, and is displayed at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History.

One of the strangest shark encounters on record occurred off Forchu, Cape Breton, in July 1953.

Lobster fishermen John D. Burns and John MacLeod apparently did something to attract a large shark, for every day in the first week of July as they rowed out to check their traps, a large dorsal fin trailed them, as though stalking them. The other fishermen watched in disbelief as day after day, only Burns' and MacLeod's dory was shown any interest by the shark. After nearly a week of this incredible behaviour, the spectacle took a tragic turn. On July 9, the shark attacked the dory, smashing its head through the bottom and creating a 20-centimetre



STALKER: This painting by Paul Kalle depicts the plight of two fishermen whose dory was attacked by a shark in Forchu, Cape Breton, in 1953.

of assaults P.E.I.'s monster shark

hole. Both men were flung into the sea. The shark did not return, but Burns drowned in the heavy seas, while MacLeod clung to the damaged hull and was rescued.

William C. Schroeder, an ichthyologist at Harvard University, identified tooth fragments taken from the dory as those of a white shark about 3.6 metres long and perhaps weighing 540 kilograms.

So what is the likelihood of a shark attack on a swimmer in Maritime waters?

"Down south, they say you're more likely to get hit on the head by a coconut than get bitten by a shark," says Campana. "Well, in Atlantic Canada, you are more likely to get hit in the head by a coconut than get bitten by a shark."

Campana stresses the conditions for shark attack are not present in the Maritimes.

"We just do not have the swimming population that the areas with most of the attacks do," he says.

And although blue, mako and Greenland sharks are species in the Maritimes that prey on marine mammals and could possibly pose a threat to people, they are not recognized man-eaters.

"Blues and makos like deep water," says Campana. "It's very, very unlikely to see them inshore."

The Greenland shark is typically an Arctic species, and likes cold water.

"If people were swimming in water where these sharks frequented," says Campana, "we might have the potential for a shark attack."

"The top three species implicated in 99 per cent of attacks worldwide are the white, bull and tiger sharks."

While tiger sharks have been caught in Canadian waters, it's been way offshore in the Gulf Stream, and bulls have never been recorded here. That leaves the white shark, which Campana says is becoming increasingly rare.

"When I started working on this coast 22 years ago, I would hear about them every year or so," he says. "Now, it's down to every three to five years."

Art Gaetan, owner and operator of Blue Shark Charters in Eastern Passage, has been

fishing sharks for 26 years and helps Campana with his research. He recently saw a rare whale shark outside Halifax Harbour and says he may have witnessed a great white a few years ago.

"We had this shark come across our slick about a hundred yards out," says Gaetan. "When it came through the slick on the right side, it had its head out of the water."

Great whites are unique for "spy hopping," or sticking their heads out of the water and looking around, presumably for seals.

Most non-tropical shark attacks are on surfers near seal colonies or spear fishermen who tie speared fish to their belt, which may explain the attack on MacDonald in the Bay of Fundy.

"That, to me, is like ringing the dinner bell," says Campana.

There are no large seal colonies onshore in the Maritimes like the one at Sable Island, which does attract large sharks.

"One year, we estimated there were 700 shark-attacked seal carcasses washed up on Sable Island," says Campana.

The prospects of being attacked by a shark in the Maritimes are extremely slim, but not for lack of sharks.

MacDonald continues to dive today, and Campana and Gaetan work to dispel the image of sharks as man-eating monsters. All agree, however, that an attack is not impossible, and a healthy respect should be given to sharks as apex predators and the ocean as a wild habitat.

"This is their playground," Gaetan says.

Sources: Fishes of Nova Scotia: Species Recorded in the Accession Books of Harry Piers From 1899 to 1939. John Gilhen. Nova Scotia Museum Curatorial Report Number 89, 1999.

On the Internet: www.mar.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/science/shark/
www.bluesharkcharters.com/
www.sharkresearchcommittee.com/
 Joe Fitzgerald is a freelance writer living in Halifax and has dived with great white sharks in South Africa.

By Joe Fitzgerald - Special to The Daily News
 It was an idyllic summer day in August 1983, when Jack Woolner and his wife, vacationing from Massachusetts, were jigging cod in the Gulf of St. Lawrence a little more than a kilometre off Alberton, P.E.I.

Woolner, an avid sport fisherman, watched his wife hook a fish and begin bringing it up to their five-metre boat. When Woolner's wife suddenly said she thought she had hooked bottom, events took an eerie turn.

"The line just stopped dead," says Woolner, now living in Shrewsbury, Mass.

The Woolners applied pressure and the line snapped. Upon examining it, Woolner saw the steel leader had been severed.

"It looked like somebody had cut it with a pair of pliers," says Woolner.

Woolner assumed it must have been faulty gear until later that day, when fishermen coming into shore announced they had caught a whale in their nets.

"We followed them in to the dock," says Woolner, "and when the 'whale' became visible, I could tell by the tail that it was a shark."

What turned out to be a mammoth great white shark was pulled up onto the wharf, the RCMP arriving shortly after.

Woolner took photos while the gawking crowd debated the creature's identity. Less than a decade after the hysteria created by the movie *Jaws*, it was quickly decided to whisk away the shark to a landfill and bury it.

"I had the sense the RCMP didn't want a big story made of it," says Woolner, "and the locals saw no commercial value in it."

Unable to persuade anyone to preserve and properly document the shark, Woolner called his friend, Hal Lyman, in Boston, then editor of *Salt Water Sportsman Magazine*, and explained the situation. Lyman called shark scientist Chuck Stillwell at the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service, who in turn alerted Tom Hurlbut at the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

From Woolner's photos, an excited Stillwell believed the shark might be a pregnant female great white, of which no samples had ever been taken.



PREGNANT?: This great white snagged itself in nets in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

"Chuck told me we've got to get samples of this shark," says Hurlbut.

Arriving a week later, Hurlbut found the head of the shark rotting in a field, and found it impossible to exhumate the body with mere shovels.

After securing money to hire a pay-loader, Hurlbut finally examined the shark, three weeks after it was caught.

"It was considerably rotted by this point," says Hurlbut, "but I proceeded to dissect what was left of it."

Hurlbut did not find young in the putrefied carcass, or Woolner's fishing gear, but he did discover the remains of two harbour porpoise and a number of cod that had probably led to its demise.

An unofficial measurement at the dock put the shark at slightly more than five metres, but Jack Woolner insists it was considerably longer than his five-metre boat.

Woolner believes if he had not been at the scene, the enormous great white would have simply slipped into the depths of anonymity, perhaps joining other such behemoths hidden in the Maritime gloom.

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