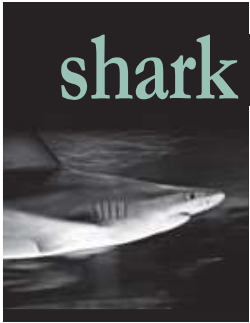


shark tales



Oceanic blacktip sharks are one of seven species of sharks that can be found at Protea Banks in South Africa.

Text by Don Silcock
Photos by Don Silcock
and Filippo Bhorgi

The Protea Banks enjoys a reputation as one of the best places in South Africa to dive with sharks, and depending on the time of year, you can see up to seven different varieties, including ragged-tooth sharks, oceanic blacktip sharks, bull sharks, tiger sharks and three varieties of hammerhead sharks—scalloped, smooth and great hammerhead sharks. Often, these varieties are in large, if not astonishing, numbers.

There is a reason for the abundant life in the region. Often described as the African equivalent of the Gulf Stream and as one of the world's most powerful oceanic currents—one that moves almost

70 million tons of water a second—the Agulhas Current forms to the southwest of the huge island of Madagascar, when the powerful Mozambique Current

merges with the equally strong East Madagascar Current. From that tumultuous beginning, the Agulhas runs straight down the 2,000km long eastern coast of

South Africa at surface speeds of up to 8m an hour, bringing with it warm Indian Ocean water rich with nutrients.

Where those waters touch off-

shore reef systems along the edge of the narrow South African continental shelf, they are the catalyst and lifeblood for some incredible ecosystems. And one of the very

richest of those ecosystems is the Protea Banks.

The Protea Banks
Located some 8m offshore from



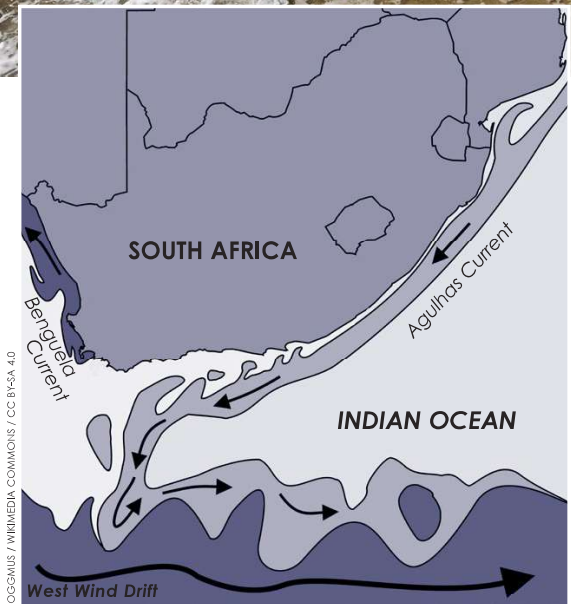
Sharks of **Protea Banks** *in South Africa*

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Map of the Agulhas and Benguela Currents around South Africa

Typical beach launch of dive boat, with divers assisting (above); Aerial view of the resort town of Margate located on the coast of the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa (right)

the seaside town of Margate in the KwaZulu-Natal province, the Protea Banks is a large submerged shoal, about 800m wide and 6km long. The average depth is around 30m, but some key locations are much deeper, so bottom times, air consumption and decompression limits are hardly abstract issues when diving there.

The shoal rises up from the short but sloping South African continental shelf just before it plunges down into the 3,500m deep Natal Valley, creating an almost perfect aggregation point for the rich

marine life of the east coast.

It really is quite a place, but it must be said that it is adventurous diving in often quite challenging conditions—because what the Agulhas Current gives, it can also take away!

Sharks of the Protea Banks

Where the huge flow of water that is the Agulhas Current encounters shoals like the Protea Banks and nearby Aliwal, it produces complex eddies and

upwellings, rich with nutrients from the deep waters to the east. Adding to the already fertile brew coming down from the north and creating the perfect conditions for the spawning grounds and nurseries for fish.

Thus, the foundation for the pyramid of marine life is created and towards its

apex are the sharks of the Protea Banks. There are so many of them that virtually every dive is a shark dive, but the encounters vary in nature from random sightings to intense, in-your-face interactions on the baited dives. But all are in open water—there are no cages here.



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Oceanic blacktip sharks

Oceanic blacktip sharks (*Carcharhinus limbatus*)—not to be confused with the smaller blacktip reef variety—are by far the most common sharks of the Protea Banks. Although not a true pelagic shark like the oceanic whitetip shark, they spend a great deal of time hunting in the waters in and around the Protea Banks and often appear both during ascents to the surface and at the safety stops.

Stout, medium-sized sharks that grow to about 2.5m in length, oceanic blacktip sharks have a distinctive light band on their flanks that stands out against their bronze coloration and light underbelly, making them easy to identify. They typically feed on smaller sharks, rays, cuttlefish, lobster and bottom-

dwelling fish, but are infamous for stealing fishermen's catch and so are not exactly popular among the fishing community of Margate.

In general, they show very little aggression and seem wary of divers. But they are easily enticed by baiting and are the main attraction for the regular baited dives on the Protea Banks. In the presence of food, they are much less cautious and can become quite "sporty" around the bait box. Obviously, greater care needs to be taken at such times, but it makes for some great photo opportunities when they do come in really close!

Ragged-tooth sharks

Known as grey nurse sharks in Australia and sand tiger sharks in the United States, the *Carcharias*



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Oceanic blacktip sharks with divers (above and right); Oceanic blacktip shark with remoras (top left)

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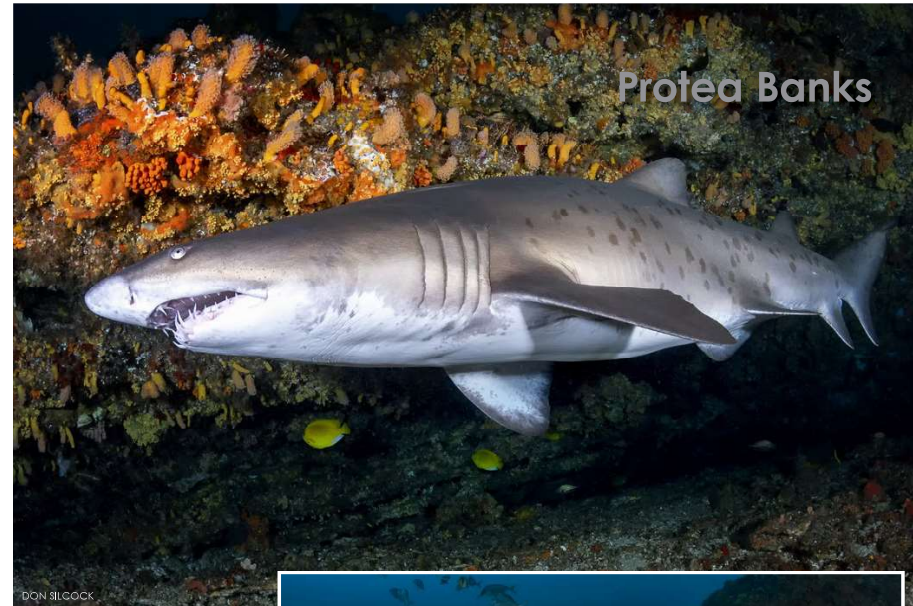
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THIS PAGE: Ragged-tooth sharks, or "raggies" as they are called in South Africa, gather in the main cave at Northern Pinnacle: One has a hook with fishing line caught in its mouth (right)



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taurus or "raggies," as they are called in South Africa, are also a regular feature of winter months at the Protea Banks. They gather there as part of their mating process, with the first males arriving around the end of April, and numbers steadily increasing through May and into June when the female raggies also appear—having migrated up from the Cape area. At its peak from mid-June to the end of July, there are literally hundreds of ragged-tooth sharks patrolling the Protea Banks.

Although primarily a bottom-dwelling shark, raggies can be encountered in mid-water and are said to steal fishermen's catches—just like oceanic blacktip sharks. They are also known to surface and gulp air into their stomachs, which they use as a pseudo-swim bladder to control buoyancy when hunting—a technique that allows them

to hover and approach their prey with great stealth.

Raggies are quite large sharks that grow to well over 3m in length and are equipped with an impressive set of teeth, which are small(ish), needle-like and evolved to pierce, secure and hold rather than sever. They also have very powerful jaws that allow them to seize and hold on to their catch, which is then swallowed whole.

They hunt mainly at night, which means they are at their most active when we have no way of observing them. Instead, we encounter them during the day when they like to hang out in gutters, caves and overhangs to

shelter from prevailing currents and potential predators.

Observed this way, they seem completely docile and almost kind of dumb as they patrol slowly round and round in an apparently aimless fashion. But the reality is they are resting and have slowed their metabolism right down to conserve energy—basically, they are almost sleep-walking, or should that be sleep-swimming?

The best place to see the raggies at the Protea Banks are the two caves



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on the Northern Pinnacle. Referred to as the "first or main cave" and the "second cave," both have large openings, which makes entry and exit easy and safe. But they are deep at around 30m at the entrance and 35m in the cave, so bottom times are quite limited.

Spending time in those caves with the raggies is a really intriguing experience as space is somewhat limited, and they are, after all, quite large animals. But they seem to simply ignore and avoid you, so the best technique is to try and position yourself in a spot where they will pass by—but allow them to come to you, as chasing them just does not work. Time in the caves is the key, but it is limited because of the depth, so a degree of luck is involved in hoping that a raggie or two will get used to you and come in really close.

Zambezi (bull) sharks

"Zambies," as they are known in South Africa, are also a regular feature of the Protea Banks. While they can be seen vir-



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Divers with bull shark, or "Zombie," as it is called in South Africa (left and below); View of bull shark from above (bottom left)

tually all year round, they are most common from November through to July. They take their name from Africa's fourth largest river, the Zambezi, where they have been seen over 1,000 miles from the coast. Bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*)—their name in the rest of the world—are the only species of saltwater shark that can exist for long periods in freshwater.

Zambies are large and robust-bodied sharks with distinctive broad, flat snouts; and their overall appearance, together with their small eyes and general demeanor, is why they are called "bulls" elsewhere. Their average

length is around 2.3m, but larger ones are not uncommon and the biggest captured was a 4m long female. Zambezi sharks are rated as the third most dangerous shark in Southern Africa, and as in other parts of the world, are thought to be responsible for most shallow-water attacks on swimmers and bathers.

At the Protea Banks, encounters with Zambies come in two flavours. First, there are the random ones on both the Northern and Southern Pinnacles. These are quite common but rarely are they close encounters as the area is rich in tuna and the sharks seem

well fed—so they have no reason to come and check you out other than their curiosity.

The second type of encounter is on the baited dives where it is normal for five to 10 Zambies to gather some 15m below the bait box at a depth of around 25m. Often, they stay there, and if you go down to get closer, so do they. Before you know it, 40m is approaching!

But occasionally, they will come up, at which point the oceanic blacktip sharks will quickly fade into the background and then the show belongs to the Zambies. They really are an impressive, if

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THIS PAGE: Tiger sharks can grow to an average length of 4m or longer. With an impressive girth, they radiate power and strength as only apex predators can.

Protea Banks

specifically targeted. But because their jaws are so powerful, the end result is deadly.

As with the Zambezi sharks, in-water encounters with tiger sharks at the Protea Banks come in two distinct flavours: random ones at the bottom during the dive, and on the baited dives. The random encounters are exactly that, and their intensity is entirely at the discretion of the tiger sharks. They may come in close and check you out or simply ignore you. It is up to them, but typically, they will give you at least a cursory inspection, particularly so on the Northern Pinnacle as that seems to be a favourite spot for them.

On the baited dives, they are attracted by the scent of the bait box and patrol around it as if trying

to understand the source. They will often wander off and disappear into the blue in one direction and then reappear later from the opposite direction, having checked out what is happening in the broader area. This behaviour aligns with their position in the marine food chain as truly apex predators and compares interestingly with that of the blacktip sharks, which seem totally focused on the bait box and only that.

The tiger sharks have a formidable presence, exuding total confidence and mastery of their surrounding environment. Eyeball-to-eyeball encounters with them on the baited dives are incredible and an experience that will stay with you for many years.

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somewhat intimidating, shark, which shows no fear or hesitation when they do come close. The encounter is clearly being conducted on their terms—very exciting stuff!

Tiger sharks

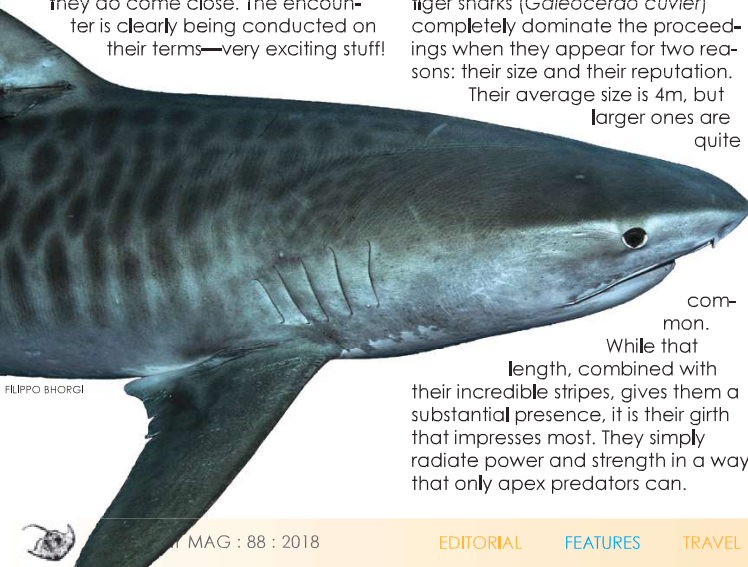
Large and very impressive animals, tiger sharks (*Galeocerdo cuvier*) completely dominate the proceedings when they appear for two reasons: their size and their reputation.

Their average size is 4m, but larger ones are quite

Combine that significant presence with their reputation as the second most dangerous shark in South Africa, and it is easy to understand why tiger sharks command so much respect. The Protea Banks is thought to be a breeding and birthing area for tiger sharks. The main season to see them is from late February through to early June, but sightings all year round are possible.

Tiger sharks typically feed on fish and other sharks but are also well known for attacking turtles on the surface. Their large, extremely powerful jaws are able to bite right through those tough shells.

It is their tendency for the stealthy but devastatingly destructive attacks from below that has probably earned tiger sharks their fearful reputation in South Africa. Such attacks on humans are more than likely mistaken identity, as opposed to



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Divers in a RIB heading to a dive site (right); School of hammerhead sharks (far right); Divers descending at Northern Pinnacle (below)



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Hammerhead sharks

The Protea Banks also plays host to scalloped hammerhead (*Sphyrna lewini*) and great hammerhead (*Sphyrna mokarran*) sharks at various times of the year, although encounters with them are rarely the close, in-your-face ones. The scalloped hammerhead sharks gather

in huge schools that number in the hundreds, sometimes several hundred, from late October through to early May as part of their annual migration. But these notoriously shy animals are almost impossible to get close to.

Instead, you will see them in the distance, where they appear as almost a



Protea Banks

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moving wall of large animals. Other times, they will pass below you during ascents to the surface or on the safety stops—but again, while tantalizingly close, they are almost impossible to photograph. Interestingly, when really large aggregations of scalloped hammerheads are seen on the Protea Banks, it is believed they are exfoliating by rubbing up against one another as a great deal of slime is always present in the water.

Great hammerheads are also present around the same time but are most common during the months of March and April. Typically solitary animals that are usually quite shy around divers, they can often be seen

cruising along the bottom, scanning the reef floor for prey with their unique hammer-shaped heads. And, if you are lucky, they may be encountered (usually briefly) in mid-water, during the staged ascents to the surface.

Significant animals with an incredible presence because of their uniquely shaped and highly sensitive head, they sashay through the water towards you with total confidence. Anecdotally, it seems that the higher the number of great hammerhead sharks there are in the vicinity, the significantly lower the number of scalloped hammerheads there are.

Diving the Protea Banks

There are basically two areas where recreational diving can be done with safety at the Protea Banks—the Northern and

the Southern Pinnacles. As their names suggest, these are the highest peaks (and therefore the shallowest parts) of the large submerged shoal that forms the Protea Banks. However, even then, the minimum depth is around 30m, and some of the best things to see are at 36m.

The laws of physics are just that—laws. So, the huge volume of water that forms the Agulhas Current gathers speed as it passes over those pinnacles, which means one thing—increased water velocity and stronger currents. Diving in strong currents, in deep waters and in an offshore area—where the next landfall is Antarctica—is not something to consider lightly. If ever there was a place to listen carefully to the dive briefing and follow instructions, the Protea Banks is it.

The Southern Pinnacles are where you will do your first dive. Of the two pinna-





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cles, it is the safer and easier one to dive—so think of it as a check-out dive. Unlike the Northern Pinnacle, where there is a very specific location from which to start, the Southern Pinnacle is more of a straightforward drift dive. There is a well-established main route that takes in the best spots along the way. But there are a variety of things to see in general, as you drift along in the current, and sticking to that main route is not as important as it is on the Northern Pinnacle.

The Northern Pinnacle is the main and most adventurous part of the Protea Banks. In terms of both your diving and listening skills, it is where the rubber meets the road. The starting point is the first or main cave which, compared to the overall area of the pinnacle, is quite small. And, as the boat will be drifting along in currents that can reach 8km/hour, it is not the easiest place to find.

The key elements of success to

getting onto the first cave is ensuring the boat gets to exactly the right position, which is done using GPS to establish location and the strength of the current—followed by a rapid negative entry and an equally fast descent, while not losing sight of the divemaster and surface marker buoy. All of this is carefully explained at the comprehensive pre-launch briefing and then reinforced on arrival—hence, the listening skills. The diving skills come into play once in the water, but if you have listened, it will all go to plan.

Dive operators

There are two well-established



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Shelly Beach-based dive operators who specialise in diving the Protea Banks: African Dive Adventures (africadive.com), run by Roland and Beulah Mauz; and Aqua Planet (aquaplanet.co.za), run by Kym Pollard. All my experience of diving the Protea Banks has been with African Dive Adventures, and I have nothing but praise for the way they conduct their operation.



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Roland and Beulah have been diving the Protea Banks for over 20 years and know it better than anybody else. It is not easy taking people out to dive safely in deep water, with strong currents and lots of sharks. But they have refined their operation, together with all the behind-the-scenes logistics that support it, extremely well.

Concluding thoughts

The "Rainbow Nation" of South Africa is an incredibly diverse and interesting country with much to see and do on land. It also offers some tremendous diving that varies from the semi-tropical reefs of Sodwana Bay near the Mozambique border in the northeast to the great white shark cage diving around Cape Town. In between those extremes

Protea Banks

is the rich marine ecosystem of the Protea Banks and its remarkable shark population.

However, it has to be said that diving the Protea Banks is not for everyone. The conditions can be downright challenging, and you really do need to be a competent diver to make the most of what there is to see there. But by accepting those challenges and preparing properly, you will be richly rewarded with some exceptional encounters and truly adventurous diving. ■

Asia correspondent Don Silcock is based in Bali, Indonesia. For extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region, visit his website at: Indopacificimages.com.



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Underwater photographer with oceanic blacktip shark; Divemaster at Main Cave entrance at Northern Pinnacle; Bull shark with remoras; Dive boat picking up divers after a dive

