

when the **HUNTER** becomes the **HUNTED**

● BY ALLEN BUSHNELL

Fatal lightning strikes are fifteen times more common than deadly shark attacks. Most kayak anglers concede the drive to the launch is infinitely more hazardous than the ocean's apex predators. Logically, we understand that in mathematical terms, fearing sharks makes little sense. **THAT'S NO CONSOLATION IN THE RARE CASES WHEN THE TABLES ARE TURNED.**



THE TERRIBLE TRIO

THE THREE MOST DANGEROUS SHARKS

"The white, tiger and bull sharks are the "Big Three" in the shark attack world because they are large species that are capable of inflicting serious injuries to a victim, are commonly found in areas where humans enter the water, and have teeth designed to shear rather than hold. Realistically, almost any shark in the right size range, roughly six feet (1.8 meters) or greater, is a potential threat to humans because, even if a bite is not intended as a directed feeding attempt on a human, the power of the jaw and tooth morphology can lead to injury," George H. Burgess, International Shark Attack File.



THE GREAT WHITE CARCHARODON CARCHARIAS

Infamous for its star turn in *Jaws*, the amazing great white grows to 20 feet in length and some 5,000 pounds. Incredibly wide-

ranging and still poorly understood, adult white sharks are thought to feed primarily on marine mammals. Great whites were positively identified or suspected in all twelve fatal shark attacks off the California coast since 1952 according to the Shark Research Committee.



THE TIGER SHARK GALEOCERDO CUVIER

Tiger sharks inhabit tropical waters. They grow to 16 feet in length—as long as a typical open water fishing kayak. Tigers aren't picky

eaters. They feed on fish, marine mammals, birds, squid, turtles, and carrion. When it comes to humans, tigers are number two on the International Shark Attack File.



THE BULL SHARK CARCHARHINUS LEUCAS

Bull sharks frequent beaches and swim far up coastal rivers, putting them in the closest proximity to humans of all large

sharks. They pose a danger to swimmers and waders. Growing to 11 feet and 500 pounds, bulls typically feed on fish, other sharks, turtles, birds and crustaceans. The International Shark Attack File ranks bulls nearly even with tigers.

SHARK SENSE

HOW TO LESSEN THE ODDS OF A SHARK STRIKE

SURVIVAL. When it comes right down to it, it's the most basic of all our instincts. We are hard-wired through the evolutionary process to make choices and pursue activities that enhance our odds of survival, both as individuals and as a species.

Sean Van Sommeran of the Pelagic Shark Research Foundation has interacted closely with great whites during tagging studies for well over a decade. This expert's survival tips are simple and straightforward. Know the territory, know the areas sharks frequent, and know when they are least likely at home. For Bean Hollow, Central California's shark incident central, May and June feature the lowest counts.

"Safety while in the ocean is a matter of familiarity and possessing some situational awareness," Sommeran says. "Travel in a group, close to shore if possible, know your escape route, have a plan 'B' and a plan 'C' at the ready. Know your escape routes at all times." He reminds us that the odds are with us. "Far more people are killed by barnyard animals or bee stings every year than by shark attack. You are way more likely to fall off a cliff or die in a car accident on your way to the beach."

When you're on the water, watch the local sea life. Seals and sea lions are first on a white shark's menu. If the seals are cowering on the beach, a shark could be on the hunt. Likewise, watch the birds. Van Sommeran says gulls often orbit expectantly over sharks.

Just as the great white has its instincts, so do we humans. Van Sommeran jokingly calls this "the Spidey sense," and advises us to pay attention to such feelings. If you are paddling out and get an uncomfortable or spooky feeling, pay attention to the vibe. Your unconscious 'lizard brain' could be reading a threat.

"Ultimately," he says, "It's a matter of acclimation. Just like the fly fishermen have gotten used to fishing rivers ten feet from bears, we have to get used to being in their (shark) territory."

Bean Hollow locals are doing just that. Former kayak guide Sean Walker routinely paddles and fishes the wild coast north of Santa Cruz. After getting an uncomfortably close look at a great white last year, Walker often thinks of them. "No more October go-outs at the Bean by myself," he says. He has altered his routine to include "sticking closer to my buddies, and I got extra flotation for inside the boat."

Dan Prather, who was knocked violently off his kayak in 2007 by a great white strike, is emphatic with his advice. "Get back in the boat! Inside the boat has got to be better than in the water with the shark," he says. Despite his close call—he watched as a shark chewed on the nose of his boat for several long seconds—Prather still fishes the Bean.

That kayak is a lifesaver. Unlike surfers, whose boards provide little protection, kayakers typically ride out an attack without suffering serious injury. Sharks that hit out of curiosity, a mistaken predation attempt, or out of territorialism quickly lose their taste for plastic or fiberglass. "They won't waste a lot of time on something that doesn't meet the food profile," Van Sommeran says.





FISH HUNTED

ADAM COCA'S CLOSE CALL

AS TOLD TO PAUL LEBOWITZ

ON AUGUST 14, Adam Coca paddled out of Bean Hollow at the head of a small group of friends and family he was guiding into the sport. The ocean was millpond flat, a near-perfect mirror for the gray sky above. In the preternatural calm, Coca decided it was time for his trainees to earn their wings. Saying he was going south to look for good structure, the experienced kayak angler known to his friends at NorCal Kayak Anglers as Fishhunter paddled off alone, digging hard. Only minutes later, he'd battle for his life against a 4,000-pound great white.

I left the pack, paddling in a zigzag. I walked the dog for half a mile. I was looking at my depth finder knowing I'm going to hit a shelf, so I put the brakes on with my paddle. I reached for a pole and that's when I felt the surge from that thing, like a vroom, boom! It tried to take the head off my kayak.

I'm in the water. I can't see a thing. It shoves the kayak into me, into my chest. Now the kayak is sideways. I'm pressed against it, my high-back PFD like a big frickin pillow on my chest, locked in, dug into the seat of my P13, water rushing over my back and I'm thinking what the fuck, this is it Adam.

I'm going in a circle. I can't move. I must have been kicking him in the mouth. The gashes in my shoe go all the way through the booty. From the looks of my kayak, it tried to take a couple of big, hard bites. It couldn't get a hold of it, like bobbing for apples. Then a tooth stuck and it continued to shove me around. It must have been at least ten seconds before it shook off.

I grabbed the scupper holes and worked my way to the top of the kayak. It came back and hit again. Oh my God the feeling. It wasn't over yet.

I'm looking at its mouth, at its eye, the triangular snout, now teeth, pushing and grinding on the front of the kayak. I'm going to have to come down and punch you, buddy. I want to think it got the vibe.

It lets go, my leashed paddle flailing behind it like a buzzbait. It rears up, turns around, grabs the paddle and takes off. The kayak jerks, the leash snaps. I slide off the back of the kayak, flip it over and get back on. I don't even remember doing it.

Fellow kayak anglers came quickly to Coca's aid. He walked away with bruises and a few cuts, underlining the razor's edge margin of his close call. In the days following the event, Coca returned to the Bean Hollow shore to meditate and pay his respects. Later, he patched the tooth holes in his battle-scarred Prowler with red epoxy. Coca figures the shark is still there, a resident that decided today's the day I check out one of those kayakers.

Kayak fisherman Niko von Broembsen employs the handle 'Sharky.' He earned the title the hard way, by surviving a life-threatening great white attack some 20 years ago while surfing in South Africa. "Physically, I've never fully recovered," Van Broembsen says. "I have only ten percent use of my left hand, no use of my left wrist, no left calf, extensive skin grafts, and permanent hip damage." He remains committed to enjoy the ocean, but never ventured out kayak fishing on the open ocean until he installed a Shark Shield. "It's a personal choice. I researched the Shark Shield heavily and I'm satisfied with published independent test results. I'm not saying it's one hundred percent effective, but I believe it's a lot better than going without one."

Even the courageous von Broembsen has his limits. "The metric I use I call 'hair on back of my neck.' The first time I looked at Bean Hollow I felt those hairs rise, and I will never fish there," he says. This choice may be the most effective safety strategy of all, choosing not to fish a particular area on a particular day, if ever. Those anglers who have had a close interaction with these apex predators likely have considered their chances and the odds more carefully than the rest of us. But, a note for anyone who has fished Bean Hollow with any regularity. Even if you have not seen a white shark there, chances are a white shark has seen you.

SHARK TALK

"I stopped to set up my gear just outside the point at Bean, and caught sight of the shark angling towards my boat. My first thought was 'this thing is the size of my truck!' I never felt truly threatened due to the shark's placid demeanor. He seemed very nonchalant towards me and my kayak. He just cruised by like a big disinterested bass. I did put my feet back in the yak and closed up the rod-pod just in case."

—Ben 'Guitarzan' Williams, California.

The SHARK SHIELD

NECESSITY OR SECURITY BLANKET?

The Shark Shield is marketed as portable peace of mind, an electronic deterrent that protects against all predatory shark species. The system consists of a head unit housing a waveform generator and rechargeable lithium battery, trailed by a whip-like antenna. According to the manufacturer, the unit's electrical field irritates an approaching shark's prey-sensing organs, causing them to veer away.

While slow to catch on in the States, over 20,000 Shark Shields have been sold in the Southern Hemisphere according to Dennis Spike, the company's North American sales representative. In addition to commercial divers and recreationalists, the Shark Shield is used by South African and Australian militaries, the U.S. Coast Guard, and has been issued a NATO stock number, implying credibility.

Yet, the Shark Shield has its doubters. The company itself admits it isn't fail proof. "It must be remembered that all sharks are dangerous and unpredictable creatures, and therefore a 100 percent guarantee cannot be given. It is impossible to guarantee that all sharks will be deterred under all circumstances," a

company representative said when fending off a lawsuit over the death of a young diver. Detractors can't resist mentioning an infamous incident that occurred during Natal Sharks Board testing, when a 15-foot great white devoured a unit attached to a buoy.

"Great whites can detect vibrations and electrical fields in the water from quite a distance. We commonly have them gnaw on our boat's outdrive, which gives off a faint field due to electrolysis. Sharks might be initially attracted to the Shark

Shield output, and then deterred once they are closer. It's possible for a shark to hang around on the fringe of the field. If the battery runs low or dies sharks might then move in," Sean Van Sommeran of the Pelagic Shark Research Foundation says. Then he softens his stance, saying it "can't hurt" to employ the Shark Shield even if only for psychological relief. "I wouldn't recommend anyone buy a shark shield and go out to boogie board the Farallones, though." www.sharkshield.com; \$600 and up.

SHARK TALK

"Uh, Steven, something big is coming up on your six. It's as long as your boat."

—Kayak Angler editor Paul Lebowitz to Steven C. Heusser off Kona, Hawaii, as a large tiger shark stalked the videographer. Heusser deployed his Shark Shield and the tiger sank out.

BULLSEYE on the BEAN

Bean Hollow is a picture-perfect cove on the rural coast of southern San Mateo County, California. The white sand state beach drops quickly to rocky depths filled with underwater boulders and drop-offs. Only a half-hour drive from the San Francisco Bay Area or Santa Cruz, 'the Bean' gets little fishing pressure from power boaters, and features very good, often-fantastic fishing for big rockfish, lingcod, cabezon and halibut. When the swell is down, Bean Hollow could be described as the perfect Northern California fishing destination.

For local kayak anglers, the Bean is known as the sharkest spot imaginable. NorCal Kayak Angler members count at least two drive-bys and two documented strikes on fishing kayakers in the past three years. That makes it the black diamond smack in the middle of the famed red triangle. Planning a visit? www.parks.ca.gov.