



SPONSORED BY:



Sharks common in lagoon

click to change font size: -A | +A

BY MARK DECOTIS • FLORIDA TODAY • AUGUST 10, 2008

Print this page E-mail this article

SHARE THIS ARTICLE: Del.icio.us Facebook Digg Reddit Newsvine What's this?

Beneath the placid waters of the Indian River Lagoon swims a healthy number of sharks -- a species often thought of as mostly ocean dwellers.

"I've been kind of troubled by how many sharks we've been seeing, wondering if this is a phenomenon," said Capt. Rocky Van Hoose of Merritt Island, co-owner of Native Sons fishing Charters. Van Hoose reported encountering hammerheads on the flats in the Grant area, a popular spot for wading anglers, and large bull sharks in several areas of the lagoon.

Capt. Mike Badarack of Satellite Beach, who runs Space Coast Sportfishing Charters, also knows first-hand.

Badarack, who plies the river as far south as Sebastian and as far north as the Barge Canal that dissects North Merritt Island, says he has seen and encountered blacktip and bull sharks in the river's tributaries and hammerheads on the grass flats. Some have measured as long as 6 feet.

So far, the sharks haven't been aggressive and people who exercise proper caution shouldn't be worried, according to Badarack.

"A lot of times when you are throwing the baits in there, they don't come in and get it," Badarack said. "They kind of just come over, they check you out and then they start working their way in the other direction. I'd be more worried about stepping on a sting ray."

That being said, anglers have stories about close calls involving themselves and stringers full of fish, which become magnets for hungry sharks. Longtime guide and fishing writer Capt. Rodney Smith, publisher of Coastal Angler Magazine, offered a simple solution: "Don't wade in the surf or Indian River Lagoon carrying a stringer of fish with you," he said.

"I've seen them aggressive, but it's been like landing a snook and be standing on the rocks and reaching down to grab the snook and here comes the shark, Smith said. "They come on real quick. So usually you're in the way of what they want to eat. That's typical."

Late spring and early to mid-summer, when sharks are breeding, are prime times for seeing them in the lagoon.

"They breed in the freshwater tributaries, or at the mouths of the freshwater tributaries, especially the bullsharks and the blacktip sharks," Smith said.

That could account for Badarack seeing the majority of sharks in Turkey Creek in Palm Bay and the Eau Gallie River in Melbourne and Melbourne Harbor. He's even seen them in the Grand Canal by Lansing Island in Satellite Beach.

Farther north, instructors with Bristow Academy, a helicopter flight training service that flies out of Space Coast Regional Airport in Titusville, have reported seeing a large number of sharks in the Indian River, one that was estimated at about 14 feet.

Bristow pilot Doug Beglan of Cape Canaveral is no stranger to water and sharks. He has a background as a surfer and wakeboard and windsurfing instructor, has been bumped a few times in the water and knows a shark when he sees one.

And he has seen more than a few from the vantage point of his helicopter as he cruises in the area of the SR 528 causeway north of Cocoa in his occasional flights over the river.

He initially saw the estimated 14-foot tiger alongside a moored single-mast sailboat from a height of about 1,000 feet and descended to about 600 feet, where he hovered for a better look.

"This thing was two-thirds the length of it (boat)," Beglan said.



MOST RECOMMENDED ARTICLES
MOST COMMENTED ARTICLES

More Sports Headlines

- Sharks common in lagoon
- Shark or dolphin?
- Running Zone series about to kick off
- Lakeland angler is Elite series' top rookie
- Tarpon, snook class Thursday

Top Jobs

Such a big shark in the lagoon is unusual, Smith said, adding: "But it doesn't surprise me."

Begian also has seen a few bull sharks he estimated to be as long as eight to 10 feet, circling wading anglers.

"I've seen that more than once," he said. "People really are taking liabilities when they are out there, up to their waists, wading and fishing."

Working in the lagoon is a big part of Melbourne Beach's Doug Adams' job as a research scientist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. He hasn't experienced any problems with sharks.

"Personally, I don't know of a human-shark interaction, which is where a human was actually harmed," Adams said of the lagoon. "We work in the water, we're in the water all the time, year around, we're in the water with fish, we're in the water with these sharks and we have never had any kind of interaction which I would consider remotely negative."

George Burgess, director of the Florida Program for Shark Research at the University of Florida, supported Adams' assertion.

"Based on memory, in the 30 years or so I've been here in Florida, I can't remember a single incident within the Indian River Lagoon, period. Regardless of county," Burgess said.

"There have been incidents, of course, in inlets, and then you always have the story of trying to figure out whether that constitutes the Indian River Lagoon or not, but it's more the oceanic condition."

Added Adams: "We're not part of their prey base. I've examined bull shark stomach contents from the IRL and they feed heavily on sting rays, catfish and quite a lot of these other species which, without (sharks) there we'd have a definite ecological implications."

The most common shark Adams and his fellow researchers have encountered and worked with in the lagoon are juvenile bull sharks.

"They are the primary species within the IRL system, not including inlets," Adams said. "Inlet, you can get a larger suite of species because of the link with the oceanic environment."

"The population within the IRL is consisting of small sharks, which are not even close to being full adults."

The lagoon is a nursery habitat for sharks, Adams said, with researchers believing female sharks enter the lagoon to drop their pups and then leave.


Research also has shown the sharks, once born in the lagoon, don't hang around, either.

"From our tagging results and from what we examined, it can be from half a year up to three years," Adams said. "Definitely as they get to be larger juveniles, we've shown, at least from what we know, they leave and head to offshore waters."

But the sharks are in the lagoon, as are many other species.

"I don't think people need to be fearful, they need to be smart," Smith said. "People are less aware every day, it's just our nature."

Contact DeCotis at 242-3786 or e-mail mdecotis@floridatoday.com

 **Sound off on this, and other topics, in our Community Forums**

In Your Voice

READ REACTIONS TO THIS STORY

characters left

Submit



Partners: Jobs: CareerBuilder.com Cars: Cars.com Apartments: Apartments.com Shopping: ShopLocal.com

[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [COMMUNITIES](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [MULTIMEDIA](#) | [ENTERTAINMENT](#) | [WEATHER](#) | [OPINION](#) | [OBITUARIES](#) | [DATA CENTER](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#) | [CUSTOMER SERVICE](#) | [Site Map](#)

[Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Subscribe](#)