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2005 Guadalupe White Shark Season Synopsis

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The 2005 Guadalupe white shark diving season has just come to a fantastic finish and oh what a finish it was! More on that final trip later. How can someone describe the 2005 season in just one word? Let's attempt with the word "phenomenal". There's a reason why I consider Guadalupe to be the world's premiere white shark dive destination. It's because, without fail, without exception, on every single one of our trips that we've run to Guadalupe since we began running them in 2001, we have had the opportunity to dive with these magnificent animals. The 2005 season was no different for us. I don't think there is anywhere in the world that can boast a 100% success record. Couple that with typically outstanding dive conditions such as 100 ft plus visibility, relatively warm water (67-72° F), and hot, sunny top-side conditions, and you've got the perfect recipe for an outstanding shark dive season. We'll continue to knock on wood for 2006.



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The most important ingredient is sharks, in particular white sharks. From the moment we first arrived in August aboard our chartered live-aboards the "Searcher" and the luxury "Solmar V", we had white sharks. A few times we had to search a bit for them, but, happily, not at all most other times. It's all part of the adventure as well as part of the mystique associated with these beautiful and amazing animals. Like most large predators, they are highly mobile and will often move to different parts of the island. Keep in mind that Guadalupe is a rather large island, approximately 25 miles long and about 5 miles wide at its widest point, so there can be numerous areas to search. However, on many of our trips, we weren't even able to complete our initial orientation dive before the first sharks paid us a visit. For some of our divers, this was their first experience diving in the ocean realm. Talk about being spoiled for life. Imagine on your first ocean dive, being surrounded by two, three, or more white sharks, ranging in size from 10 to 15 feet in length, all gracefully swimming only a few feet away from you. You peer into their dark eyes as they stare back into yours. I simply don't think any of those future quarry, lake, or beach dives will ever be the same.



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Part of the joy of returning year after year to Guadalupe is the ability to observe and record behavioral and seasonal trends, anomalies, or simply unique observations in regards to the white shark population at the island. This year we recognized some similarities with past seasons, but we also recognized some subtle and not so subtle differences. Similarities included the recognition of numerous individual sharks from past seasons. Once again, sharks that we have come to know and feel a bond with (Little Stumpy, Half-fin, Bite Head, Patches, Two-scratch,

Scarface, and many more) returned with their toothy grins intact. Some showed up with a few additional scars collected while others showed up with their scar pattern or severe wound once readily identifiable, now markedly healed, revealing a



remarkable ability to recover from injury. One individual affectionately known as "Patches" because of a dark patch of "skin" found mid body along his right side, showed up again early in the season. We first met Patches three seasons ago when he was a wee bit over six feet long and very shy about approaching the boat. Back then, he would simply circle around us, typically coming no closer than 50-100 feet of the boat. Of course, this was probably due to the fact there were usually

larger, more assertive sharks swimming within that perimeter. Those nasty scars we see on white sharks are primarily from other white sharks, so Patches was most likely displaying some well-justified caution. We can now say he's growing into a fine, young white shark. He's put on quite a bit of weight since we last saw him and has surpassed eight feet in length. I can also say he is not quite as shy as he once was as he actively asserts himself among the other sharks. An exquisite young predator he is turning out to be. We look forward to hopefully seeing him again next season.

All told, we recognized about 15 individuals from past seasons. Some stayed with us for a few days while others stayed in the vicinity for a month or so before moving off to some other unknown location. Like previous seasons, we also noticed a slightly skewed male to female sex ratio, depending on the time of year. Similar to past seasons, we observed more males showing up early in the season (Aug-Sept) with additional females showing up later (Oct-Nov), approximating a 50/50 split by the end of the 2005 season (Dec). Of course, our sample size as well as field sites are limited, but we do find this to be an interesting observation that has proven to be repeated each year since we began running expeditions to Guadalupe.

Interestingly, we also encountered a relatively large number of individuals (15-20) throughout the 2005 season that we don't recall having seen in past seasons. Some of these individuals were large females (14-15 footers) that either looked pregnant or had recently stuffed themselves with a hearty meal. Since we are often anchored up



not more than ¼ mile from numerous Elephant seal haul-out spots on the island, either explanation holds some merit. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we also observed some rather small white sharks this season. One shark couldn't have been more than five feet in length - an ideal size for swimming in-between the bars of our cages. Just kidding folks, but truthfully, she has been the smallest white shark to date that I have seen at the island.

Of particular note, the sharks seemed far more ranging and mobile while at

Guadalupe Island this season than in past years. In the past, more times than not, we could anchor up in long-established "hot-spots" and have fantastic shark encounters throughout the season without ever having to pull anchor. One of our golden rules is "We don't leave sharks to find sharks". In other words, if we are having great luck with sharks at a particular spot, we aren't going to pull anchor and run the risk of wasting valuable hours/days looking for new sharks at a new location. However, near the latter half of the season, we began to notice a significant drop in shark activity at the established "hot-spots". Determined to provide our customers with the best possible viewing opportunities, rather than sit put and hope for the best, we began to search and sample new sites at the island. It wasn't long before we found these new spots. What we discovered was that the sharks were not leaving the island prematurely, but rather migrating to other parts of the island and maintaining a modicum of site fidelity to these new locations. We suspect the sharks were changing locations as a direct result of the changing tuna concentrations or the tunas' movements to other locations around the island. Either way, we discovered some great new sites and had a blast in the process.

Here at GWA, we strive to gain a more comprehensive and long-term record of white shark occurrence and behavior while at Guadalupe. Due to our long-term



presence at the island, we additionally feel we can be the eyes and ears of the island in terms of looking out for any potential concerns or problems. Our presence at the island not only helps us to understand and contribute to the knowledge base of these animals but also assists in their protection and ultimately, the safeguarding of a species that is highly vulnerable to the lethally exploitative motives of a select minority. The island is large

and the local governmental resources limited. As long as we are able, we will continue to provide support in any way we can. With that responsibility, we hope to instill in each of our passengers a deeper appreciation and for some, a newfound respect for this critically important keystone species. Most of the time, this is the easiest part of the journey. All our passengers should know that in their own unique way, they are helping to ensure the health and longevity of white sharks at Guadalupe.

Suffice it to say, there was no shortage of remarkable and memorable events for the 2005 Guadalupe season. Here's a few that come to mind:

On one lucky trip in October, we were fortunate enough to have a unique and highly fortifying pre-dinner appetizer, Wild Kingdom style. After a good day of sharking, we were all preparing for another delicious dinner by our talented cook Randy, aka Lurch (nicknamed because of his subtle resemblance, tall stature, and deep voice). The sun was just beginning to set. Some people were gathered in the galley discussing the days activities, reviewing their video, etc... while others were on the back deck enjoying a cold beer while watching the sunset colors come into full bloom. As for myself, I was in the wheelhouse chatting with Captain Kevin. Then, without any warning, about 200 meters off our port bow, came a thunderous splash. Captain Kevin and I just happened to be looking in the general direction at that exact moment. From deep below, a nicely sized white shark had just made a direct attack on a young elephant seal that had come to the surface for a quick breath of air. It was to be one of his last. The velocity and force generated by the shark attack catapulted both shark and seal completely out of the water. Within seconds, it became obvious that Kevin and I were not the only ones to have witnessed this spectacular event.

Passengers from the galley and on deck

who had witnessed the attack began excitedly pointing out the spot as we watched a growing patch of water begin to bloom a deep crimson red right before our eyes. Without hesitation, the decision to pull anchor and position ourselves for a front row viewing



opportunity was made. As we pulled anchor, the mortally wounded but still alive seal bobbed to the surface. Peering through the binoculars, it became obvious that the lower third of its body was missing. It was simply a matter of minutes before its fate was secured. As Kevin maneuvered the boat for a closer view, the shark reappeared, slowly circling the now dead seal. It took about 5-10 minutes before the shark began to consume his prey. The shark was about 13-14 feet in length with a distinctive long dark scar running down its left posterior flank. Later in the season, we were able to identify this shark again, determining its sex as a male. It took about 7-8 bites over a period of about 20-30 minutes to completely consume the seal which looked to be a juvenile weighing approximately 250lbs. Needless to say, our dinner was postponed so we could observe this unique feast. It was an amazing spectacle that all aboard felt very lucky to have witnessed. Although relatively routine attacks such as this can be observed on our Farallon trips, and I've been privy to dozens, it was a first for me and our passengers while at Guadalupe, and I felt very fortunate to have had a front row seat.

"Happy jumping sharks" is how one delighted passenger described one of our other trips to Guadalupe. I'm not sure what it was or what was going on but on one trip, we had about 5 full breaches take place right along-side the boat or at least 100ft of the boat. There didn't seem to be any apparent reason for the breaches and witnesses in the cages couldn't determine any reasons as well. There weren't any seals or sea lions around, nor any discernable schooling fish, just "happy jumping sharks". Sure, why not. One of our crew guys, Steve, got an extra close look at one of those breaches. Just after breakfast, Steve was on the back deck filleting up some fish we had just caught. He was positioned with a cutting board along the port stern railing. Quite a few of us were out on deck and in the cages looking forward to another great day of shark diving. I was talking to Steve. From out of the blue, no warning at all, a large white shark breached completely out of the water, a mere foot or two away from Steve. So close in fact, that one of the shark's pectoral fins made contact with the railing that Steve was using to fillet a fish. To fully appreciate this feat, one must understand that the railing sits approximately 8 feet above the water's surface. Suffice it to say, my eyes as well as everyone else's who had been sitting on the back deck nearly popped out of their sockets. Now, Steve is what I consider a man of relatively few words, extremely cool, calm, and collected. He's been around the block, spent many a season commercial fishing the brutal



Alaskan seas, worked as a hunting guide in Alaska, seen and done a lot of manly-man things kind of guy. Now he won't admit it and I don't have proof, and granted, things were pretty exciting at that particular instance, but at that moment when the shark popped up and looked to be coming on deck with us, and Stevo closer than any of us to the shark's head, I swear I heard what I took to be a high pitched girlie type of scream coming from his end of the boat. I suppose we'll never know the true origin of that scream. Only the shark knows for sure.

Finally, I alluded to the fantastic finish of the 2005 season in the first sentence of this wrap-up report. Once again, "phenomenal" comes to mind. This truly was a trip that had it all and a fitting end to yet another remarkable season. It all started with



some good luck and some good omens. What was supposed to have been a bumpy winter weather crossing ended up being relatively calm. About 4 hours out of port, we encountered an enormous school of white-sided dolphin (maybe 700 animals) many of which followed us for a bit, playing and surfing on our bow wave. Shortly after this encounter, we happened upon a small pod of Fin whales (60-70ft in

length), the second largest whales (after the Blue Whale) in the world. These animals actually swam up quite close to our boat, in some cases not more than 50 feet away. We simply stopped engines and drifted with them for about 30 minutes. Wow, pretty fun so far and we're not even halfway to the island. An hour or so later a call comes over the boat's PA system. Orcas dead ahead!!!! People grabbed for

their cameras and raced out on deck. Sure enough, a small pod of Orcas consisting of a large male and 4 smaller females was circling just off our bow. It appeared that they were successfully hunting something as we saw a grease or slight blood slick form in their immediate vicinity. We stayed with them for about 20 minutes before they decided to move off in another direction. Orcas on our crossing, now that's a first. Poseidon was certainly smiling on us for sure. Our time at the island was as equally productive. On our second



day, the morning got off to a great start with a full breach just off the stern of the boat. The previous day, we had spent some time looking for a good spot to set up operations. We had a few good passes by a couple of animals but not as good as I wanted it to be so we picked up anchor and decided to go to this new location. As an astute and seasoned observer, I have to say, breaching sharks is usually a good indicator of a good spot. And a good spot it was as we had virtually non-stop shark action for the next 6 hours. The third day we had sharks to play with as well. Three days of sharks, Orcas, Fin Whales, dolphins and all is well in the world. One really can't ask for more and judging by all the content happy smiles I saw, it seemed like there was a group consensus in this matter.

Speaking of group consensus, I must say that all our groups that joined us this season were really, really fun, which isn't surprising. All our groups, past and present, have been a blast. Something about shark fans makes them some of the coolest people on the planet. They come from all walks of life like Joe, a tattoo artist from Rhode Island who



has a massive shark tank in his basement to Danielle, an ER nurse from Nevada who put aside her fear of the water for a few moments to hop in a cage with sharks circling. Good Job D.! Then there's Sean, a two tripper, a Wall Street wizard with a penchant for excitement, to Simon, a supercool British film-maker now living the life in Malaysia.

Oh yeah, there's Bob, a hip cemetery owner and his "S.O." Alex, caterer to the stars, not to mention both being major dune buggy enthusiasts. Of course, I want to list everybody but there's a space limit here folks. Suffice it to say, I will remember each and every one of you. This season we saw a lot of old friends returning for their second and third times with us. People like Sean, Bob, Hal, Sue, Katherine, Bruce, Linda, Robert, Mauricio, Dean, Kerrie, "Bud", Kike, Bill and too many others to once again all list here, while we met and made a lot of new friends I hope and sure to see again. Every trip and group is different which makes it all the more fun. I'm already looking forward to next season. Thanks to all for providing us with another fantastic season. As the legendary undersea explorer Mel Fisher once used to say, "Today's the Day", and it certainly was for every day this season. See you next year.

Sincerely,

Scott Davis
Expedition Leader and Shark Aficionado
Great White Adventures, Inc.

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