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The Blue Sharks of Montauk

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By Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver
 Photos courtesy of Charles Wade

At the extreme eastern tip of New York's Long Island lies the sleepy hamlet of Montauk. With miles of pristine beaches, great fishing, clean air and controlled development, this outpost has retained its charm and allure for many a city-weary traveler in search of something different from the trendy and often busy Hamptons just to the west. One of the landmark icons of this out of the way location is the Memory Motel, where Mick Jagger drew his inspiration for some of the Rolling Stones' blues-inspired rock songs in the 1960s after having spent some time there. Our aim on this expedition, however, was not revel in this conventional Montauk milieu: we were here to dive with blue sharks in the open Atlantic some 30 miles south of Montauk's world famous lighthouse.



It was a sullen, overcast morning when the 36-foot dive boat *Sea Turtle* departed the docks and headed south to the warmer waters brought north by the Gulf Stream. With a low cloud cover, and occasional passing fog bank, we made our way to the general location in about two hours. Once there, the shark cage was lowered. Easily accommodating two divers, air is supplied by two 80 cubic inch tanks attached to the inside of the cage with long hookah-type hoses. The *Sea Turtle* uses custom locking clamps to secure the cage

tightly to the boat's transom to safely load divers into the cage's top hatch. Once inside, the hatch is closed and pushed about 5 to 10 feet away from the boat. The cage floats about 3 to 7 inches below the surface using special floats and is always attached to the boat with a strong steel safety cable.

Soon the crew began releasing a chum slick into the water. Sea birds, like the small and fragile looking storm petrel and the graceful shearwater, quickly converged on the immediate area, happy to snatch an easy meal.

With a gentle swell and cool temperatures, we prepared ourselves for an extended wait for the action to begin. However, within 30 minutes, just as we settled in for some quiet time in the cabin, the first shark appeared. With a fabulously colored blue back and distinctive torpedo shape, the identification was



unmistakable: an 8-foot blue shark!

Like a phosphorescent ghost, the sleek animal glided almost effortlessly below the stern and was clearly interested in the chunks of sliced mackerel and other fish parts that were being released into the water.

Quickly, we suited up and within a few minutes we had forsaken the planned practice dives with the cage for the real deal. In minutes, we were inside the cage face to face with our quarry. Both elegant and menacing at once, this shark was a beauty. For the next 30 minutes, we twisted and turned within the cage, photographing each pass of the large animal as it circled us. Occasionally, curiosity got the better of the shark and it would nibble the bars of the cage, or attempt to wedge its nose between the bars and get inside. We were literally within inches of one of the Atlantic Ocean's famed predators.



With an indigo blue back, and bright blue sides complementing a sharp white underbelly, the blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) is one of the prettiest of the world's sharks. Found worldwide in the open oceans, the population in the Atlantic is known to migrate along the Gulf Stream all the way to Europe, south to the African coast and eventually back to the Caribbean Sea. The shark can reach a length of 12 feet and is an opportunistic feeder, consuming large

quantities of squid and other small fish. Once considered the most plentiful shark in the sea, blue sharks have been victims of severe over-fishing and their numbers are dwindling. As with all the creatures of the sea, we felt privileged to be sharing this small section of ocean with this magnificent predator.

Cage diving takes some getting used to. Although the cage does provide the necessary protection from the sharks outside, the swells continually banged us around inside and the clanging of metal combined with the circling sharks, the drifting chum and the darkness of the deep Atlantic below combined for a vividly textured sensory experience. In short, we were thrilled!

Subsequent dives in the cage were even more exciting as more sharks appeared throughout the day. On our last dive, a half-dozen sharks simultaneously circled the cage. This was an amazing experience as we watched the sharks approach from all angles. We could literally touch the sandpaper like skin as the sharks swam within inches of our cameras, and could easily observe their nictitating membrane as it would reflexively close and open over the eye as the shark attempted to bite the cage bars.

With more sharks in the water, the action clearly heated up. Peering between the bars of the cage into the surrounding ocean, you could sense an almost palpable change in the environment; there was more menace in the water than earlier. Perhaps it was the more vigorous consumption of the fish parts in the water by the sharks; perhaps it was the more frequent nibbling of the metal bars of the cage. Maybe it was just the fact that six 8- to 10-foot blue sharks were circling the cage and they clearly had no intention of leaving anytime soon!



The ocean is often referred to as a silent world. However, there is an unmistakable **"SNAPPING"** sound heard whenever a shark sharply closes its jaws to bite into its prey. Sometimes, with the action swirling all around us, it was this **"SNAP!"** of the jaws that would alert us to a shark behind us, above or below. With the two of us in the cage at the same time, we would often lock eyes and smile underwater as the sharks continued their pursuit of food.

Blue sharks are not the only species encountered in this part of the world. Shortfin mako (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) are frequently seen as well as the more rarely observed common thresher shark (*Alopias vulpinus*). Throughout the day, we kept our eyes peeled for these species as well, but in the end we were more than satisfied to have spent our time with the blues.



Soon, however, our time was up. Although we were completely satisfied with our photo expedition, it was with a sense of regret that we pulled the cage and began heading for shore. We wanted more time! As we cruised back into Montauk Harbor, the sun finally poking through the low overcast, we were thrilled to have shared the ocean with one of its most beautiful inhabitants and we immediately began making our plans to return. And the next time someone asks if we've enjoyed Montauk, we'll smile

and say "Yes, we've got the Montauk blues"...and only we'll know exactly what we're talking about!

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