

DIARY JULY 2005

Where in the world do you go to see flying sharks?

South Africa, that's where.

To be precise, I've been based in Simon's Town south of Cape Town for the past few weeks, heading out into False Bay each morning to try and film one of the most spectacular predatory events in the world. It's here that Great White Sharks gather to attack the colony of Cape Fur Seals, careering up from the depths to deliver a killer blow to the seals as they swim overhead. The behaviour is very seasonal, and not entirely predictable. I was here 2 years ago to try and film the same thing, and on that occasion only witnessed 3 attacks in 3 weeks. This time it's been different. From our first morning out on the water, it was clear that the sharks were here in force and what's more they were very keen on getting a meal.



Subsequently, each morning we've witnessed upwards of twenty events, and event being an attempt by a shark to catch a seal. Not all are successful, on average about 50% end in the shark getting a meal.

The day starts well before first light, getting all the gear onto a boat and heading out into the bay. The run to the island takes about half an hour. By the time we arrive, the light is creeping into the sky and we just able to pick out the dark shapes of seals returning to the breeding island from the fishing grounds outside the bay. So can the sharks. Often the first clue that a seal has been attacked is a gathering of birds, mostly Kelp Gulls, which home in on the kill sites to pick up the scraps. If we are quick we may reach the site in time to see the shark lazily finishing the last chunks of its meal. Some of these fish are giants, well over 3 metres, many are over 3 and weighing in excess of a ton. They prefer to target the smaller seals, those born earlier in the year. Presumably they make for easier quarry, less experienced and less fit.

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It's the initial attack that we are trying to record. The sharks have learned that if they charge towards the seals from below, they can deliver a devastating blow with open mouth which, if well aimed, leaves the seal no chance of escape. From Time-to-time, these attacks are so rapid that that sharks leap clear of the water. That is what makes the event so dramatic to witness. Seeing a ton of fish, over 3 metres long suddenly exploding skyward after a seal is really very shocking.

It's also potentially very beautiful. I say potentially since it is so quick and unpredictable that recording it on tape is challenging, and even if I do manage to record a breach, it's over in a moment. The answer is to try and record it in extreme slow motion. To that end we have been working with a very new camera system, developed to record ballistics and crash tests. It uses a very powerful computer that stores masses of information in a very short space of time. Furthermore, it does so in a continuous loop. Depending on how we set it up, the moment I press the trigger the image will be recorded from the beginning, middle or end. I have the trigger set to centre, which ensures everything the camera has seen for about 1.5 seconds beforehand is recorded. If we are very, very lucky, I am pointing at the area of water that erupts with a shark and get the shots I'm after. So far, we've been pretty lucky. I've already recorded a couple of breaches at 1000 frames per second. That results in a final image running at 40 times slower than real time. The scale and the power of the attacks is made very tangible.

All of this is done on a moving boat. In an attempt to keep the whole thing fairly stable, I work from within a hoop set up at the back of the boat (an old bicycle wheel in fact) which allows me to swivel my upper body without losing my footing and so keep the horizon roughly level.

The first hour and a half of each morning is the frenzied period. At times there may be 3 or more kills in progress and we must settle on the one we feel is most likely to result in strong images and stick with it. By 10.30 or so the activity is generally dropping off. It's then that we can break out the pole cam. This is simply a camera in an underwater housing, on a long pole, which we can drop over the side to try and record the sharks and seals in their true element. Often the sharks investigate the boat with no incentive other than curiosity, but a fish tail on a rope increases the likelihood that they'll pay us a visit. The idea is not to allow the sharks to take the bait, simply to bring them close enough to film. We've tried this on a couple of mornings with only moderate results. The truth is that they seem well sated by their morning's hunting and it's all they can do to muster the energy to give the bait a passing glance. The seals are naturally curious, but understandably reluctant to swim any distance from the island unless it's at top speed. Consequently, only on the calmest of days have we been able to approach the shoreline with the pole-cam. The resulting views on these visits have been lovely though, with a "seal soup" beneath the surface all performing a sub-aqua ballet.

The weather dictates our work pattern and so far we've been incredibly lucky. In just over 2 weeks we've been out on all but the past 2 mornings. A north westerly has kept us land bound for the past couple of mornings allowing a certain amount of catch up with writing and admin. To be honest I can't wait to get back out there! I'll let you know how the rest of it goes.

Simon