

# ABOVE 18m

In this issue, we head to offshore waters for a slightly humorous take on the Above 18m series, on a quest for **blue shark** encounters. As this is a snorkelling trip, you might even attain a depth of 18 inches! For reader continuity and familiarity, we've kept the general format of the series, but with a couple of tweaks...

Photographs by **JEREMY CUFF** ([WWW.JA-UNIVERSE.COM](http://WWW.JA-UNIVERSE.COM))

**D**iving or snorkelling with sharks is normally associated with the great white encounters in South Africa, South Australia or Guadalupe in Mexico, or perhaps the Osprey Reef dives in the Coral Sea off North East Australia that attracts mostly reef sharks. But to some people's surprise (and to a tabloid journalist's delight whenever the story has made the wider media), you can also do it here in the UK, with the target species on our trip being blue sharks.

Personally, I'd been aware of the blue shark encounters off the coast of Cornwall for some time, so last December when I was planning some things for the New Year, the Cornish Blues again bubbled to the top of my 'to do' list. Though I'd already done two blue shark trips previously, I fancied doing it again.

Options for this type of trip are very limited due to the 'niche' nature of the subject matter and the relatively small 'time window' in which the sharks can be reliably seen, and the weather is potentially most stable. I chose to go with shark enthusiast Charles Hood, who is friendly, knowledgeable and keen to share his interest in sharks. The trips run out of Penzance (weather permitting) between late June/early July and early October, and his

success rate of finding 'the Blues' is around 95 percent.

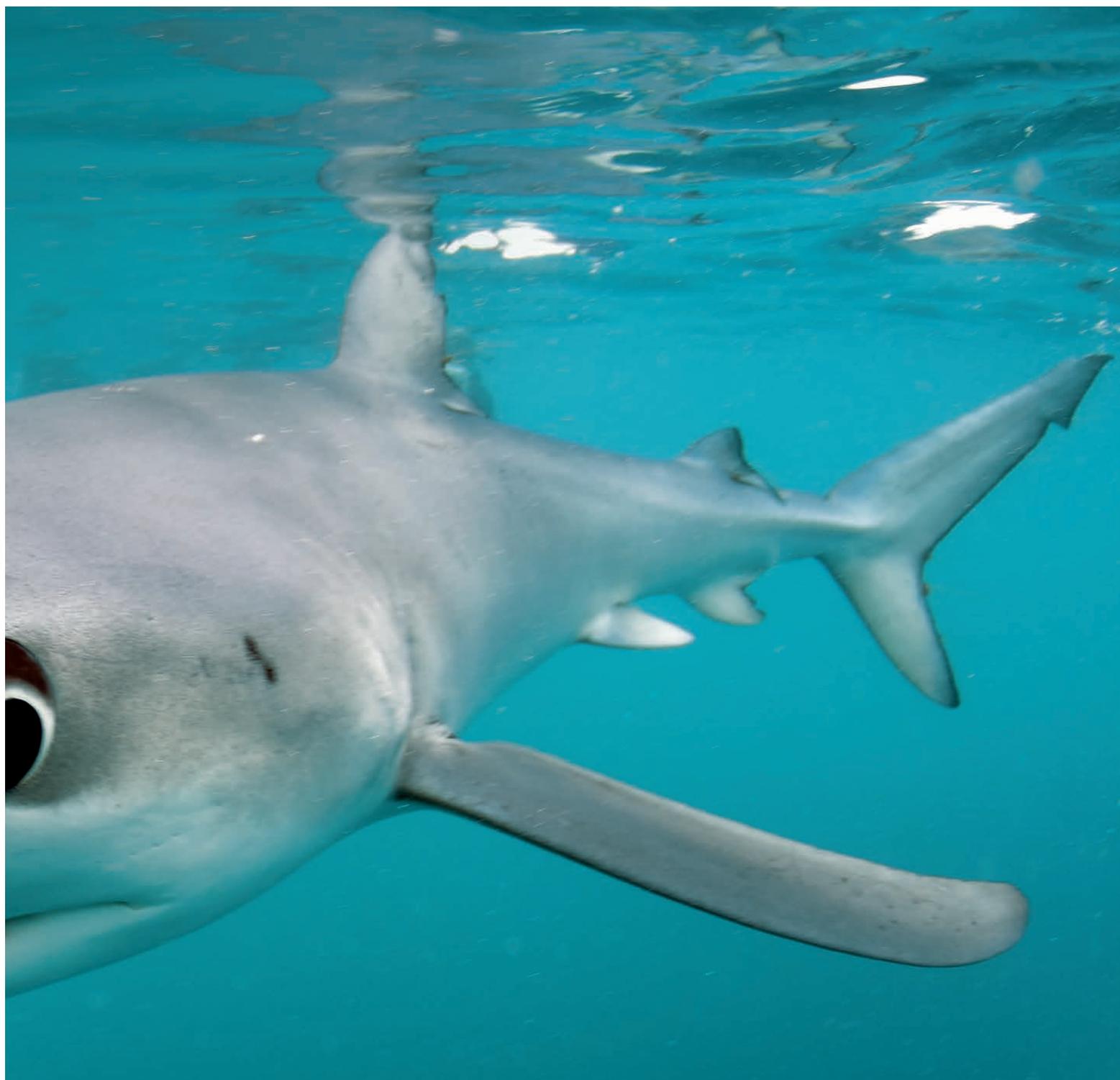
The blue shark is a species of the open water and deep reefs, with a global distribution that covers tropical, sub-tropical and temperate zones. They are known to cover great distances, and are thought to utilise currents such as the Gulf Stream to reach waters around the UK and Europe.

Appearance-wise, they are very sleek and clearly suited to their pelagic lifestyle. They are known to hunt small fish and cephalopods (especially squid), though they're also thought to feed on bottom-dwelling species on occasions.

Their colouration on the back and flanks, though always blue as their name suggests, can differ markedly between individuals; from a blue-tinged grey to a very deep blue, which contrasts with a white underside.

In terms of size, they can attain an impressive four metres in length, though most specimens encountered will be significantly smaller than this. Coincidentally, a record blue shark was caught by fishermen somewhere off Penzance in August 2017 - it was a massive specimen. It's worth Googling it to have a look at the picture. Thankfully, it was returned to the water, though we didn't manage to encounter it on our trip!





### ARRIVAL AT THE 'SHARK' SITE

The meet up for the trip is around 8am-8.30am in the main Penzance car park next to the harbour and slipway (where Charles launches his boat, RIB Logan). There's plenty of space and I've never seen it full, especially first thing in the morning.

In terms of the shark site itself, Charles aims for a general area in which the sharks have been reliably encountered in the past through trial and error, rather than a specific seamount or pinnacle that approaches the surface. The area is about 15 miles offshore and around 17 miles from the starting point of Penzance.

Once the engine is switched off, Charles gets to work attracting the sharks as we drift with the current. Nothing is guaranteed in the ocean, and it's certainly possible to spend all day in seemingly perfect conditions without any sightings whatsoever. While we waited, we wondered what would our encounters would be like.

It would be almost impossible to encounter blue sharks without something to attract them in, so Charles uses pre-prepared chum which creates a slick that leads to the boat, which he deploys as soon as we've arrived in his chosen area. The chum is quite rancid, and won't suit those with a squeamish disposition or anyone who gets badly seasick. Even while in the water, you're very aware of it as you tend to spend most time in the 'best area', which is down-current of the chum basket. If you swallow any water, you can taste it!

As the chum spreads out to cover a wide area, there has to be some way of making the boat and the area immediately around it the focal point of the shark's investigations, so that they can be easily seen. Charles does this by supplementing the chum (which remains

## BLUE SHARKS IN CORNWALL

As far as I'm aware, you have two options for blue shark encounters in the South West, either with Charles Hood based out of Penzance, or Atlantic Divers based out of Newquay.

The Charles Hood trip, which is the one described in the feature, is very good and allows snorkelling with the sharks (maximum of five participants). The Atlantic Divers trip is also good, but is a cage-dive trip, where participants take turns to enter a two-man cage to view the sharks.

[www.charleshood.com](http://www.charleshood.com)  
[www.atlanticdiver.co.uk](http://www.atlanticdiver.co.uk)

# BLUE SHARKS, CORNWALL

## WHAT TO EXPECT

### TYPE OF 'DIVE'

Actually, it's a snorkel. As you can drift a fair distance with the current during the day, you could call it a 'drift snorkel'!

### DEPTH

Probably around a mammoth 18 inches, unless you duck dive down. As you're in full wetsuits (which are very buoyant), I didn't see anybody try the 'duck dive'. It is a good idea to take a weightbelt which helps to counteract the buoyancy of the wetsuit, and to provide better stability and posture in the water.

### MARINE LIFE

Blue sharks (hopefully several). It's also possible that you could see dolphins (we did), porpoise, sunfish or even basking sharks.

Charles said that on one trip, what he believed to be a porbeagle shark once investigated the chum, but came in and went very quickly. Don't rely on those kind of surprises, but you never know what might turn up. Expect a few jellyfish in the water as well.

On the topside, seals are possible, especially on the rocks close to the coastline. Twitchers can expect to see several seabird species, such as fulmars, shearwaters, guillemots, storm petrels and gannets.

### VISIBILITY

Out at sea, away from the influence of river run off, the water tends to be clearer. It is, of course, infinitely variable, depending on wind direction, current, plankton and other factors, but can be six to ten metres if you're lucky.

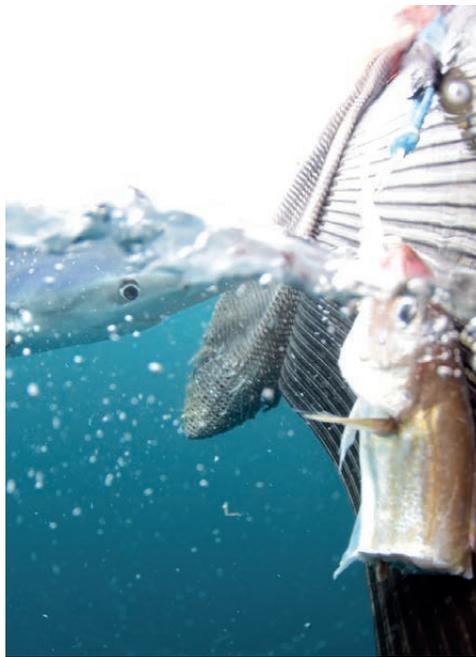
### SEABED

It's down there somewhere, but you can't see it!

### HAZARDS

Sunburn, dehydration, cold and seasickness are the main hazards and not to be underestimated.

Make sure you take decent seasickness tablets (you've got nothing to lose and everything to gain), plenty of fluids and some warm (ideally waterproof) clothing. If you don't, a day of misery could await you.



as protection. A weightbelt is also preferable for balance and posture in the water, counteracting the buoyancy of the wetsuit.

in the water all day in the 'chum basket' with some fresh mackerel that he catches enroute, throwing in small pieces at regular intervals. He also attaches larger pieces of bait to a rope suspended by a buoy, which is floated a few metres from the boat. Any shark that investigates it can usually be seen breaking the surface, which alerts everyone to its presence. Then, once the sharks have become more confident, Charles can slowly draw the bait towards the boat, hopefully bringing any interested shark with it and into clear view.

### DIVE (WELL, SNORKEL) BRIEFING

As a generalisation, it tends to be divers that do this trip, but non-divers can also participate, though it's important that they're fully prepared in terms of the gear required and are comfortable with the likely conditions and circumstances they'll find themselves in.

Back in 2016, at the same time of year (early September), I did the same trip with Charles and got horrendously seasick, even though I don't normally suffer badly with it. I was so ill that I was in the water puking and retching while trying to shoot sharks - it wasn't good.

This time, I sought out some decent seasickness tablets and ensured that I took the required dosage before setting out. It seems that the 'open ocean swells' have a different kind of movement which can catch people out, so be prepared. You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain by taking them. Happily, I was completely fine on the 2017 trip.

Other essentials are staying warm, remaining hydrated and bringing the correct gear. It's surprising how easy it is to get cold out at sea, even though it may feel warm and balmy onshore - warm coats or hoodies (ideally waterproof) and hats are therefore essential. Also, make sure you bring food and plenty of drink to keep yourself going. Don't underestimate the conditions (which can, of course, change considerably throughout a day).

In terms of gear, it's up to the participants to bring everything they need, as Charles doesn't have room to carry spares onboard for those who've forgotten something important. The checklist is mask, snorkel, wetsuit (5mm minimum), fins, boots, hood and gloves. As the sharks can be attracted to bright and light-coloured objects, Charles won't allow anyone into the water without a hood and gloves

### THE ENCOUNTERS

No one day is the same on this trip, either in terms of the number of sharks seen, or the confidence (or lack of) exhibited by the sharks around the boat and snorkellers, which can affect the quality or duration of the encounters.

This trip had a similar start to my previous 2016 trip; a wait of between one and two hours before our first 'blue' turned up, a small specimen in this instance. When the fin and tail broke the surface next to the bait, a wave of anticipation swept across the boat. The sharks tend to be skittish and wary initially, so we waited until they became more accustomed to the boat and the bait. Then a larger pair arrived, resulting in the disappearance of the small specimens that had begun to gather confidence. It was as though the larger pair had driven them away.

At that point, it was time to get wet and see if they would stick around. They seemed not to like all of us in the water at once and gradually moved away, so we decided to get out for a while and watch from the boat. We then experienced a lull in activity.

Just as we were beginning to think that we'd had the best of the day, a larger specimen of around two metres in length turned up, confidently checking out the bait and chum basket. This was our opportunity to get back in the water. We then enjoyed a prolonged encounter with this large, bold specimen as it moved between us, around us and sometimes right towards us, even bumping us with its snout on a few occasions. I wouldn't say it was intimidating, but you certainly give it respect.

Though not as many sharks turned up on our day compared to a very active set of encounters from the previous day's trip, we were lucky to get this late encounter - it made the day. On one special day, Charles reported an incredible 20 sharks around the boat!

As we headed back to Penzance, amid gathering winds, everyone was happy. I imagined what the headlines of some tabloid journalist reporting on our trip would be ('Killer sharks sighted just off UK shore...' or some nonsense). But that wasn't the reality; we'd had a unique and rewarding experience, encountering a species that rarely comes into contact with humans. That evening in the pub, there was a contented tiredness among our group, and I slept like a log that night. It was a good day. ■