



BASKING SHARK PHOTOGRAPHY

While many divers travel the globe in search of whalesharks, **Nick and Caroline Robertson-Brown** suggest we need look no further than our own waters for a gentle giant experience...

Photographs by FROGFISH PHOTOGRAPHY



“You don’t need to don your scuba gear; in fact, you are better snorkelling at the surface when taking pictures of basking sharks”



Dappled sunlight



Basking shark night dive

One of the highlights of the UK underwater photography calendar is the arrival of large numbers of basking sharks in spring. Many divers travel thousands of miles in search of encounters with their bigger brothers, the whaleshark, and yet we have an equally impressive encounter available right on our doorstep. The first sightings are usually in Cornwall, as plankton blooms start to draw in these elusive characters close into our shores. Then, as the spring turns to summer, the basking sharks swim right up the coastline, with sightings from Lands End to John O’Groats.

Basking sharks are an endangered species that are fortunately protected here in the UK. They are huge, with some reaching over ten metres in length. When feeding, they open their mouths wide to gather huge quantities of micro-organisms and this makes for some stunning imagery. They also often feed very close to the surface, so you can get split shots, reflections and beams of sunlight in your photos. It is also sometimes fun to try to get another snorkeller in the shot to show the huge size of these impressive elasmobranchs.

You don’t need to don your scuba gear; in fact, you are better snorkelling at the surface when taking pictures of basking sharks. Remember that visibility can be reduced due to the very food they have arrived to eat, so they loom into focus out of the gloom. You can see their approach by looking above the surface for their dorsal fins poking out of the water, as they swim along hoovering up plankton. Don’t try swimming after them, chasing them to get the shot, as they are much faster than you and you will chase them away and leave everyone else disappointed. If you wait patiently and work out their feeding/swimming pattern, they will come right up to you.

You can spot a basking shark pretty much anywhere in the UK over the summer months, however, to get the ultimate experience, the best way to see them in the water and get a chance to photograph them is to go on



Starburst



HOW DID WE GET THESE SHOTS?

All these shots were taken with a Nikon D700 with 16mm lens, no strobes were used for any of these shots.

Basking Shark Night Dive: Actually, this was taken in daylight and is a trick in Photoshop using a filter called 'torch effect'. The odds of finding basking sharks in the dark are slim!

Starburst: You really need the sun out for this one! If you can manoeuvre yourself so that you are above the shark, with the sun above and slightly ahead of you, you might catch the rays. Do not use strobes for this type of shot. Settings: F11 to give a good range of depth of field; ISO 500; 1/125sec.

Basking Shark Portrait: A side-on colour image as the basking shark swims past closing its mouth and turning to pass. Settings: F6.3; ISO 250; 1/200 sec.

Black and White Portrait: Side-on shot showing the feeding behaviour with mouth open wide: Settings: F7.1; ISO 250; 1/200 sec.

Dappled Sunlight: This side-on image of a shark feeding shows off the light quality of our weekend with the basking sharks. The light rays are bouncing off the shark's back. I tried to capture the reflection in the surface to create a mirror image. I have used a fairly high F-stop to gain a relatively large depth of field. Settings: F11; ISO 500; 1/125 sec.

Clear Water with Diver and Shark: This shot has been modified in Photoshop to give the impression of warmer waters. It shows the size of the shark compared to the snorkeller and the sandy bottom of the bay where we took the shot in Cornwall. Settings: F6.3; ISO 250; 1/200 sec.



Black and white portrait

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Clear water with diver and shark

a specialist trip. Each year, Frogfish Photography takes a group down to Cornwall to get together with Charlie Hood, one of the UK's leading basking shark experts. He has inside information on where they might be on any given day. He can get his RIB Logan in close so you can get into the water and wait for them to approach. You need to book spaces on these trips well in advance, as this is a popular subject for wildlife watching and underwater photography. Of course, nothing is guaranteed when it comes to wildlife photography and you have to have a bit of luck to get good weather conditions and for the basking sharks to be feeding inshore.

Tips on how to get a great basking shark shot... Wide-angle lens is a must. These sharks are very big and will approach very close if you are having a lucky day. Watch out for backscatter if you are using strobes as there will be lots of particles in the water. Try natural light shots to get the sunrays bursting through the water. As they feed very close to the surface, there is lots of available light and so strobes are not necessary. Take lots of photos and stay in the water with them for as long as you can.

For more information on basking sharks and to report sightings to improve scientific knowledge of these creatures, please visit The Shark Trust's dedicated website: www.baskingsharks.org ■