

CORNISH BLUES



It isn't only baskers
that like to hang
out off Cornwall in
early summer –
WILL APPELYARD

jumps on a RIB for a whole new
shark experience

DRIVING DOWN THE A303 on route to Cornwall, I found it difficult to accept that I was joining a shark-diving expedition but not actually leaving the UK. This had to be too good to be true.

The trip was to consist of a single day looking for Cornish blue sharks aboard Charles Hood's RIB, leaving Penzance at 8.30 on a Saturday morning.

With other commitments either side of this trip, it was going to have to be a quick 600 miles in and out, sleeping on the hard shoulder of some A-road in the campervan both there and back. Essentially I was leaving London and going to Cornwall for the day!

Shark encounters in the UK to me are a thing of myth and legend. I have often heard stories of spearfishermen around Portland's west coast being "hounded by porbeagle sharks" attracted to a belt-full of bloody plaice, or reports of mako sharks "sneaking up on divers off the Shambles bank".

These experiences or sightings always seem to happen "last week" or to "someone's mate", so when offered a place aboard Charles' boat, I had taken no convincing to drop my plans for the weekend and get down there.

IT MADE A REFRESHING CHANGE to pack just a minimal amount of light gear, because we would be observing these animals from on or just under the surface, as opposed to scuba-diving with them. It dawned on me that I wasn't sure if I still owned a snorkel, but I managed to dig out something I had found while diving in Dorset a few weeks earlier (a black Mares snorkel found on the Aeolian Sky, in case anyone is still looking for it).

With my drysuit, weight-belt, mask and snorkel packed, I set off and definitely felt as if something was missing.

Conditions were perfect on the day, with absolutely no wind, flat-calm sea and a high of 23°C forecast.

A slight fog hung in the air that morning, which accentuated a feeling of nervous excitement and trepidation.

With ropes-off prompt, Charles gave his boat briefing just outside the harbour and we set off, St Michaels

Pictured: So that's why a rubber mat is hung over the side of the RIB!

Mount peeking through the mist in the background. We all knew each other on the boat, which helps because unexpected seasickness sufferers can ultimately dictate if or when a trip ends.

Charles prefers to take small groups to make the trip as comfortable as possible for everyone, because we would be sitting on the boat for many hours.

We motored offshore for what seemed a very long time, and couldn't help asking the question: "How many more miles?" As land disappeared from sight, "16" was the answer.

We slowed down to observe a pod of porpoises, which broke up the journey, and sea conditions remained as they had begun, even when we arrived at the "dive-site".

I ASKED CHARLES HOW he knew where to find these animals, and he told me that it was the work of several years spent researching and gathering information from local fishermen.

He began to prepare his well-organised boat for the next stage of the expedition – "chumming" the water. In addition to this he began to fish for and catch a bucket full of mackerel.

These would provide the bait, hanging under two buoys designed to bring the mysterious predators to the surface.

I then asked Charles about the thick

rubber mat he had hung over one side of the boat. "It's to stop the sharks' teeth penetrating the tubes of the RIB," he replied.

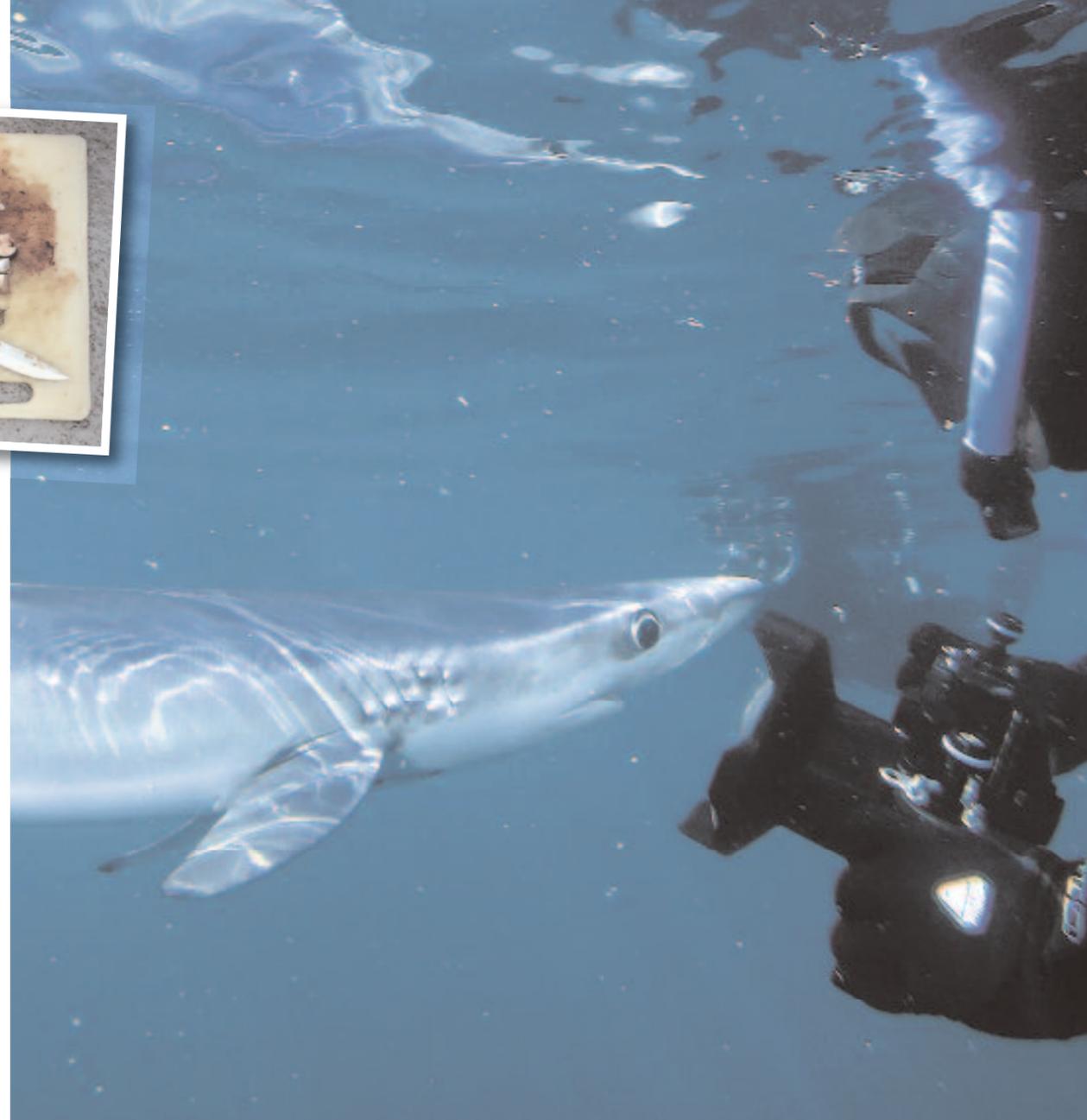
"Right you are," I thought as I did a quick scan of our exposed position, with only the odd passing container ship for company.

With the two buoys in the water, one set at 2m and the furthest at 10m deep, a net bag of chum was slung over the side and a fish-oily slick began to drift off with the current. All we could do now was wait.

As with any wildlife-observation-related trip, there were no guarantees that the creatures would turn up, but Charles did announce that he had only one failure to his name, with the waiting time being anywhere from five minutes to two hours.

We sat and chatted, joked, ate our lunch early, chatted some more and all the time stared at those mackerel-loaded buoys, willing them to do something to signal that sharks were in the area.

As the two-hour mark came and went,



Above: Blue sharks like cameras – especially GoPros.

Top: Mackerel chum is used to attract the blue sharks.

Left: Blues grow no bigger than a man-size 2m, but they command respect.

Right: The waiting game.

I did start to wonder whether we might now be recorded as the second trip that failed to see any action. However, hope returned to the boat as the 10m buoy suddenly disappeared below the surface.

As well as the weather, the visibility that day was on our side, and we could see the orange buoy pulled down into the depths, perhaps 8m or more.

Once it had reappeared, Charles pulled the buoy back in and reloaded the rope with mackerel. This scenario was played out several more times over the course of half-an-hour or so, the idea being that the shark on the other end might come and have a look at the 2m fish-loaded buoy.

The plan eventually was to entice the creature or creatures to the surface, and get them used to the boat.

After quite some time playing cat and mouse (or fish and shark), a sleek and slender electric-blue shape appeared at the surface. A new sense of apprehension

arrived with it – would the shark stay with the boat long enough for us to get into the water with it?

That feeling soon subsided, because clearly this animal was super-inquisitive and wasn't going anywhere.

For safety reasons, all divers entering the water had to be wearing a drysuit or wetsuit as well as hood and gloves – preferably black. No areas of skin should be on show, as this could be construed by the shark as something edible.

ONE BY ONE WE SLOWLY zipped into our drysuits, donned weights, fins, mask and snorkel and slipped over the side of the boat into the shark's environment.

"They like cameras," Charles announced, "especially GoPros". I was quite glad to have my camera with me, not only to capture this experience forever and share with others, but as a barrier between the sharks and myself.

One of the other guys on the boat had

a GoPro with him, mounted on a stick. This, after Charles' comment about how attractive GoPros were, now to me simply resembled a fishing rod and bait.

Once in the water and on the chummed side of the boat, the shark came straight to us, bumping its nose into the camera lens right away.

Blue sharks are incredibly slender animals and perfectly adapted to their environment. This one's striking blue back shone and almost flashed as the sun caught it, and its long pectoral fins reminded me of an oceanic whitetip's.

Charles continued to bait the buoyed ropes he had out to attract the sharks, and between checking out our cameras and us, the shark would also engage with the baited ropes. The propeller and the side of the RIB were also high on the shark's menu and provided fantastic photo-opportunities as long as they kept the animal's attention.

AFTER AN HOUR OR SO in the water two more sharks suddenly appeared, one smaller than the first by a good 30cm and the other slightly bigger. It is said that blues grow to more than 2m long, so we had a selection on our hands now.

During the briefing we were told to keep an eye on the sharks at all times, which proved difficult with three now involved in the party. Often one or two of the blues would disappear into the gloom and on every occasion they would reappear in the opposite direction to that which you might have expected.

These creatures were not monsters by any stretch of the imagination, and we had all been in the water with bigger sharks in various parts of the world, but they commanded equal respect. I for one

was not about to become complacent.

The in-water action lasted for a good three hours, and between us we must have taken several hundred shots.

I made a conscious effort not to spend the whole dive looking through the camera's viewfinder, and to actually enjoy these creatures at first hand.

As photographers, it is too easy to spend most of our underwater time looking through a lens. It's so important to put it aside from time to time.

One by one we reluctantly left the clear blue water, our shark friends and the chum slick, climbed back aboard the boat and prepared to find land again.

The weather and all-round sea conditions had been more than generous to us that day, and we were all pumped to have experienced an encounter that one would normally expect to find only a plane-ride away.

With the sea still as flat as a millpond, we glided back to Penzance and collectively flicked through a few images over a couple of decent local ales.

Some might disagree with the act of attracting wildlife to a boat by means of "chumming" the water, or whatever you might like to call it, and we all know that the debate rages fiercely over cage-diving in certain parts of the world.

However, Charles Hood's operation is low-key and informative, and it struck me that in this instance, 16 miles offshore, the sharks were observing us as much as we were observing them.

*** Charles Hood takes a maximum 4-5 people (aged 18 or over) per trip. The price of the boat charter for the day is £700, charleshood.com/snorkel-with-blue-sharks**

