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OUR LATEST NEWSLETTER

Hi all

It's been a long time since we last chatted and so, so much has happened during this time that we really have to sit and think how we can fit it all into this newsletter.

We have just returned from a month on the sardine run in Transkei and we are playing catch up as fast as possible.

Prior to our departure for the sardine run, we did tell you that 5 female ragged tooth sharks never left Aliwal Shoal at all during summer and this is a first for this area. Our raggie sightings are usually from late May, early June until October/November. These females remained at Raggie Cave area, with 1 sighted at Cathedral at times and the other raggies arrived late May. To date we have raggies all over the place, from the Pinnacles area, through to Raggie Cave, Cathedral and at times, Chunnel.

On a dive to Shark Alley, I was looking for frogfish (painted angler) and paper fish – not a tall order really (tongue in cheek)!! We skipped from the southern ledge to the northern ledge and in an area that looked like frogfish territory, I searched and searched and found a yellow sponge that I thought looked strange. On a very up close and personal inspection, it was the yellow frogfish!! Yahoo, we all went mad, lots of photographs were taken of it and the mission of the dive was accomplished.



On another outing, we came across a large pod of bottle-nose dolphins (dollies) and noticed one with an albino dorsal fin and white blotches on its flanks. Just as we thought we were seeing things, up it came for air again and there was no mistaking its unusual colouring.



And then, on a lovely sunny, flat ocean day at Aliwal Shoal, as we were ending our long 70 min dive on the Pinnacles, one of our divers signalled shark and I just caught the tail end of a very, very large shark!! We all finned as fast as we could to see what shark it was but it had disappeared?? On jumping into the boat, we overheard someone say "whale shark" and we thought "No, that's not possible, on such a shallow reef"?? – Well! It was. It was an 8m whale shark on the Pinnacles.

Oh, on another special dive outing, we found a very unusual partnership. A cleaner shrimp sitting on top of the head of a raggie scorpion fish, cleaning it!! Carol MacLean was lucky enough to capture the image of this unusual cleaning station – well done Carol!!

And then, trying to be brief, along came the sardine run.....

We have just returned from an amazing sardine run 2009. We were based at Mbotyi again this year and had simply stunning marine encounters. This year we had a few "stop 'start" days due to a massive cold front coming through, causing the surf and swell to pick up to un-launch able heights and forcing us to explore the amazing beauty of the Transkei. On our launch days, which were the majority of the time, we had beautiful interactive encounters with humpback whales. Breaching, tail slapping and one whale, in particular, spy-hopped (stuck its head & upper body out of the water) 3 times around the vicinity of our boat, causing applause from all onboard. On a check-out dive with a new group, Andrew dropped us into some action and we were extremely fortunate to get a cape fur seal on scuba, which went from person to person to take a good look, some close encounters with copper sharks (bronze whalers) and some very emotional close passes from common dolphins, whom we really thought were looking at us with a kindred spirit and keeping the sharks from coming closer. They kept coming by, as if keeping an eye on us all the time and wondering what on earth we were doing.

We witnessed some great sardine action with cape gannets dive bombing into the water, dollies excitedly herding the sardines tighter, sharks trying to get in on the action and then Bryde's whales barging through the whole bait ball, narrowly missing divers & snorkellers. What chaotic fun!!!!!! There were times that the brain was spinning trying to take it all in – so fast & insane and just mind blowing. To quote some of the divers with us – "*I say nothing, I surrender*". "*The most chaotic, insane action I have ever seen*".

We have to boast that on one day, we had a bait ball of sardines all to ourselves and we scuba dived on this bait ball at 8m for 72 minutes. Yup, we timed it and could not believe it. First off, we found the action on our own, the micro light could not fly on this day and we were on snorkel. Then we found that the bait ball was not moving much so we got onto scuba in the water and dived on this bait ball. We had around 7 copper sharks, a pod of common dolphins and gannets diving in on the action.

At one point, 2 dolphins were working this bait ball and the others were on the outskirts. Then the dollies would give a mad whip of their tails, charge into the relaxed bunch of sardines to group them together and the other dollies would come charging in again, all this way and that.



The dollies would look at us on scuba, not quite understanding whether they were saying “well are you also going in to feed or not” or whether it was “what are you doing here? Why are you just hovering there”? It was very amusing. They would fly in at speed alongside us to charge into the bait ball, or fly in just below our fins, all at the fastest speed possible.

And then, we surfaced again to call some of the others off the boat that had decided not to scuba and when they joined us, the bait ball was still there!!!!!!! Eventually after all this time and with an empty scuba tank, we decided to get back on the boat and wondered where the other boats were!!

And then, if all this insane daily action over 30 days was not enough, the mother of all sardine loads was encountered on our final day of the trip, much to the absolute delight of everyone!!!! We were in the Mkambati area just north of Mbotyi and our micro light pilot informed us of some great sardine action from the air. We got everyone onboard to hold on tight and motored up to the area, which was some distance from where we were at the time. Boats descended and as we all got in on snorkel, this bait ball just got larger and larger. Hysterical laughter and excitement ensued as we witnessed 2 cape gannets ascending from 8m, each fighting over 1 sardine and continuing to bicker about this 1 sardine on the surface, even though the largest bait ball ever was below them!!!! We were able to keep track of this unbelievable spectacle of nature on snorkel, all taking turns to scuba dive with it too and then, when tanks were empty, track it again and continue on snorkel. This bait ball was at around 8m and to be frank, I have never ever witnessed so much action at once!!!! We must have had at least 50 sharks all around this bait ball, a massive pod of dolphins keeping charge of the little silver critters, gannets blasting in through the mass of sardines, with sharks in the action, on the side of the action, behind us, below us, in front of us, to the side of us, in our faces, brushing against our fins and it was just the biggest mind blow of my life and everyone else too. We followed this action for over 2km, changing from scuba to snorkel all the time. The loud sounds of excited dolphins could be heard from the boat. If it cannot get any more insane, it did. A Bryde’s whale blasted through this mass of sardines, snorkellers scattered in excitement and so nature just put on this most unbelievable display for us!!! And.....all of a sudden, there were ragged tooth sharks in the action, then there was a Bull (Zambezi shark). Then a thresher shark was spotted, and so it continued on to lemon sharks, dusky sharks and of course copper sharks. All in all, 6 shark species were with this action, plus the dollies, gannets and Bryde’s whale. In addition to this, there were many species of baitfish sighted this sardine run trip, which scientists feel may have something to do with global warming. 1. East coast round herring (*Etrumeus teres*). 2. Red Eye round herring (*Etrumeus whiteheadii*). 3. Anchovy. 4. Mackerel. 5. Saury. This will give you an idea of how exciting and insane this find was!!!!!!! Viz was around 12m, good enough to keep up and keep a watch on everything. After what seemed like hours, our divers were just too exhausted to carry on and we left the mass action and headed for home.

That night, photographs were exchanged, videos shown and delighted faces were everywhere!!!!!! What a perfect end to the 2009 sardine run. Thank you Mother Nature for showing us this outstanding sardine migration!!!!!!!



If you are on Face book, check under our group name and you will see some of the images taken of the action or look at our website www.divingwithsharks.co.za where we will shortly be uploading these images.



Images courtesy of Damien Grouille



Images courtesy of Damien Grouille



Images courtesy of Damien Grouille





DIVE CONDITIONS & DIVE SITE NEWS

We have gone from days of 8m viz to days of 40m viz and we have a constant 21°C water temperature on Aliwal Shoal.

As mentioned, we have in excess of 30 raggies on the reefs at the moment, with bulk numbers at Raggie Cave & Cathedral.

OCEAN AWARENESS EDUCATION

Prior to leaving for the sardine run, I was a guest speaker at a ladies function and did a presentation on ocean awareness, responsible seafood choices, the shark finning industry, shark conservation, by catch and ocean education in general. Many of these ladies had no idea what was going on within our oceans and this presentation was extremely well received by all. I have also been asked to be a guest speaker at Rotary functions and will let you know how this progresses.

CONSERVATION & RESEARCH NEWS

With all the ragged tooth sharks at Aliwal Shoal, we are continuing with our research project on these sharks and invite anyone interested to come and dive with us to learn more about these beautiful sharks. If anyone has any images of ragged tooth sharks at Aliwal Shoal, we would love to be able to share these and post them to a new website that is being developed with our scientific partner and funded by PADI, on the Raggies of Aliwal Shoal. If you have anything to share and put onto the website, please get hold of us.

SHARK AWARENESS COURSES

Don't forget that we are running a host of SharkLife/ PADI Ragged tooth shark courses this winter, and we can tailor make these for you when it suits you, if you are not able to join a scheduled course date. (Visit the SharkLife website www.sharklife.co.za for our course calendar)

Also don't forget to check out our website for the mobile shark safari packages that we are offering, beginning with shark diving at Aliwal Shoal and then continuing with shark awareness courses up at Sodwana Bay (Ragged tooth shark & Whale shark) or at Rocktail Bay (Ragged tooth shark). Both of these spots are exciting sites and we can join you there and continue diving with you. For the upcoming summer months, we also offer a trip up to southern Mozambique to learn more about Bull (Zambezi) sharks. All of these are tailor made and don't necessarily have to involve shark diving.

Contact us if you would like to learn more about all of these amazing animals.



SOFT CAGE DIVING (VIEWING PEN)

Africa Dive's soft cage diving with Blacktip sharks (of which we are intricately involved) has been launched, the first in KwaZulu-Natal and has been met with huge excitement. We have had various media coverage articles (*People magazine June 5th volume 23 – Sunday Times newspaper 12th July – Top Billing magazine programme due to be aired 6th August*) of the product and most of the people that have joined our pioneering trips have been non divers and very nervous of sharks. Within 5 minutes of snorkelling within the confines of this soft viewing pen, to get comfortable, all have hopped over the other side and spent time happily without the soft cage and viewing blacktip sharks up close. Everyone remarked on how graceful and beautiful these sharks were and how comfortable they felt in the water, surrounded by sharks and that their whole idea and perception of the oceans majestic creatures has since changed due to this encounter.

Our aim with this project, together with SharkLife, is to show people that their perception of sharks amidst the Jaws era, is incorrect and lacking in substance and education and that in taking part in this encounter, that they will realise that sharks don't deserve the reputation that humans have given them and that they need to remain in our oceans at all costs!! We aim to further educate all non divers or non ocean going people that are sceptical of sharks as to how amazing these animals really are and that people can co-exist happily with the apex predators of our oceans, thus giving sharks a much deserved chance! With this in mind, hopefully we will get more ambassadors for all sharks and their future and in turn, more people taking part in ocean activities equipped with more knowledge and understanding.

The proceeds from these trips will go to SharkLife, to aid their growth as a non-profit conservation group creating an awareness of shark conservation and lobbying for further protection of our shark stocks.



Photo courtesy of Justin Barker



So..... Be sure to watch this space and we will update you on all our exciting sightings as they happen.

Until next time, take care, happy bubble blowing wherever you are and we look forward to having you on the boat soon!!!! And don't forgetresponsible seafood eating & choices.

Debbie & Andrew
DIVING WITH SHARKS

A few client feedback letters:

Dear Debbie and Andrew,
it was brilliant to be on your boat for this fantastic trip. You were great company and I always felt safe in your hands. I hope to come back and do it again in the coming years.
I watched the photos on your page and they are great.
I send you a big hug back and let's meet up if you come to London,
Nicolas

Hey Deb!!

Just wanted to touch base and say thank you for the most incredible trip and experience of my life! You and Andrew were soooo amazing! I just can't stop thinking about the holiday and of course boring people with my sardine stories! I love S. Africa so much and I am thinking of coming back next year in April/may time before the world cup!!

Sandy