

In pursuit of Mako and Blue sharks

by Charles Wright



South Africa is blessed with a huge variety of shark species that frequent its waters. Much has already been written of the Great White population off Cape Town and the Tiger sharks that are to be found off the east coast of Kwa-Zulu Natal and equally the population of Ragged Tooth sharks and Zambezis (Bull sharks) there.

In recent years, shark researchers and operators have been gathering information on Blue and Mako sharks as well as taking interested people along to witness these magnificent pelagic sharks. However, as much as South Africa is blessed with its shark variety, predictability of viewing and experiencing sharks is tenuous at best. While this may be

frustrating, it is very rewarding when the day comes along and the diver gets to see and experience sharks close up. Persistence, commitment, tenacity and luck are what is required to witness South African sharks close up.

On 5 April 2009 we set off to try and find the elusive Mako and Blue sharks with Chris and Monique Fallows of Apex predators. This was to be our third trip in two years with the sharks having eluded us on both of our previous trips, Once was due to bad weather and the other being a “no show” from the sharks. Apex predators is based in Simons Town and offer trips to see pelagic sharks in the open ocean off Cape Point and Great Whites off Seal Island in

False Bay. We booked for both the Saturday and Sunday in order to maximize our chance of finding and seeing the sharks. On Friday Monique e-mailed to give us the news that Saturday was not looking promising but that the indications were that Sunday was going to be near-perfect conditions.

Saturday was spent enjoying many of the various activities that the Cape has to offer including taking photographs in the beautiful surroundings, having lunch and a quick visit to ORMS camera shop in Cape Town.

On Sunday morning at 7h00 we gathered at Simons Town harbor where we met the others who were to join us for the day. Our boat was a 36ft catamaran with a walk around deck. There was plenty of space as there were only 8 clients plus the crew on board, which is nearly the limit for the trip. After stowing our snorkeling gear we departed Simons Town for Cape Point.

In Simons Town harbour, water temperature was 11 degrees, but Chris was looking for water that was above 20 degrees. After radioing the lighthouse Chris headed out to deep water looking for the warmer water where we could expect to find pelagic sharks.

Although seeing sharks is the primary reason for the trip, spending time with Chris on the ocean is a fascinating learning experience in itself. Chris has a wealth of knowledge and experience on sharks, ocean currents and bird life which he readily shares with his guests interspersed with stories of what he has experienced on the ocean. He showed and explained the current lines on the ocean surface and we all watched the depth finder show the increase in water temperature as we crossed over the current lines.

When Chris thought that colour and temperature of the water were ideal he slowed the boat and instructed the crew to prepare 2 lines to catch a fresh Tuna for bait. Within what seemed only a few minutes the crew had caught and landed a 30kg Yellow Fin Tuna. While we were stationary, Chris pointed out that he could see some tuna below the boat, sardines were thrown into the water and Long Fin and Yellow Fin Tuna appeared from the depths to take the sardines. The Tuna were close enough to the

surface that we could easily identify the 2 different species and they sometimes approached within meters of the boat.

Although there were no sharks present Chris decided to put the cage in the water to give us the opportunity to see the Tuna underwater and possibly get some interesting and rare photographs of Tuna. However, before the first clients were in the cage the first Blue shark appeared. Although the name is very descriptive I was surprised at how vivid and distinctive the blue coloring is. The Blue sharks were about a meter in length and were small enough to swim fairly easily between the bars of the cage.



They kept appearing until we had 10 – 12 sharks around the boat. During this time the Tuna were still present and unafraid as they were formidable predators compared to the small size of the blue sharks. Chris spotted the first Mako from the boat by the distinctive movement they make underwater compared to the Blue sharks. When the first Mako arrived the Tuna left and the rest of the morning was spent with 2 Mako sharks about 2m in length and the Blue sharks.

Everyone on the boat got a least 30 minutes in the cage with plenty of opportunities for photography. The most challenging part of which was being bumped around in the cage by the slight surface swell and chop. Most of us felt slightly seasick and claustrophobic in the cage. On previous trips, Chris had allowed us to snorkel around the back of the boat without the confines of the cage. If I were to make another booking with Apex Predators, I would check to see if this option is still available.

The best photography opportunities are definitely ambient light with a 10mm or 16mm wide angle lens. While visibility was in excess of 15m the best photographs were taken when you could capture the sharks right next to the cage with less than a meter of water between you and the shark. Having visibility of at least 15m helps you anticipate when the sharks are going to approach your camera, as you can track the shark's movements.

The trip was fantastic and it was rewarding to eventually get to see Blue and Mako sharks. We were left with unanswered questions as to why we saw so many juvenile Blue sharks and no mature adults. Blue sharks can grow to 3.5m so the sharks that we saw were “babies”. Where are the adult sharks? Has long-lining taken its toll or is it a seasonal thing.

I will definitely go back for another experience and try and improve on the photographs I took during the trip. These types of trips need luck and persistence to get the right conditions and the right action to take place on the day to get “the shot”.

