

Spotted Raggedtooth Shark (*Carcharias taurus*)

sand tiger (USA), grey nurse (Australia)

These charismatic creatures, affectionately called “Raggies”, are commonly seen cruising the gullies on Aliwal Shoal, Quarter –Mile at Sodwana and other rocky reefs. Although they are large and can be aggressive if provoked, they are generally passive and will allow you to approach quite closely if you are calm and relaxed.

Identifying features

This stocky bodied shark has small eyes and a short pointed snout with a protruding set of teeth - hence its name. It is pale brown or grey with brown spots. The anal and two dorsal fins are almost the same size.

Distribution (map)

Raggies generally occur in shallow coastal waters on or near shallow rocky reefs. In the Eastern Cape the young often enter estuaries where there are fewer predators and an abundance of food. In late winter adults move up the coast to KwaZulu-Natal where they mate.

Feeding

The smooth-edged, pointed teeth are designed for catching a variety of fish and juveniles of other sharks, which are usually swallowed whole. Raggies may feed co-operatively in packs on a variety of shoaling fish. They are usually more active at night and often lie in wait for their prey. These animals do not feed very often during their gestation period.

Behaviour

Raggies are usually slow moving. They swallow air to overcome negative buoyancy, so that they do not need to keep swimming to prevent sinking. They are one of the few sharks that can actively pump water over their gills and therefore can hover for long periods.

Reproduction

The adults move to KwaZulu -Natal from July where they congregate on reefs including Protea Banks and Aliwal Shoal for mating. Courtship is a lengthy process which involves the males inflicting bites on the females. Many pregnant females then migrate further north to the St Lucia Marine Reserve for part of their gestation period. They return to the south eastern Cape waters to pup. Mature females in South African waters are believed to reproduce only once every two years. The gestation period is 9-12 months. The young develop in the uterus with energy supplied by large egg yolks. The largest embryos feed on the other developing embryos within the uterus and usually only two pups are born, one pup per uterus.

Growth

Both sexes mature at 320 cm after approximately 5 years. They reach a maximum size of 320 cm and the maximum weight caught is 294 kg. These fish live up to 20 years.

Fishery

Raggies are caught by shore anglers and are sometimes taken by ski-boat anglers, particularly during fishing competitions in competitions. Large numbers of these sharks have been tagged and released alive by shore anglers. They also form part of the by-catch of other line-fishers and commercial trawlers.

This species is considered to be extremely vulnerable to over-exploitation due to late maturity and particularly small litters. Elsewhere in the world, the species has received protection on the east coast of the United States and in Australian waters.