

Marine Animal Identification Index



Wells Beach, Maine. Photograph by: Jack Voishnis

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There are many different species of marine life in the waters along the shoreline of the Gulf of Maine. Being a lifeguard requires that one be able to distinguish a life-threatening ocean predator from that of a general ocean creature. When a dorsal fin is spotted above the water, it is common to assume the worst. However, most of the time the dorsal fin is that of a non-aggressive shark or is not a shark at all. The purpose of this report is to help a lifeguard better classify what they are seeing in the water so that the appropriate measures can be initiated..

Here you will find names and images of common ocean species that can be misconceived as a shark and images of sharks that can be found in the Gulf of Maine and could be spotted at Wells Beach.

Seals



Seals are very commonly mistaken for a dorsal fin. Their rounded heads and dark color are the main reason for this. There are numerous seals found at Wells Beach and they are constantly moving around and popping their heads up. Seals can generally be found along rocky coast lines in the Atlantic, such as that in Wells, and are usually gray, black, brown, or tan in appearance.

Porpoise



A porpoise is very closely related to a dolphin. Harbor porpoises are very common in the Northern Hemisphere along the coastal Atlantic. The dorsal fin of a porpoise is very distinctive because it is very triangular. Porpoises can be up to 8 feet in length and prey on fish in shallow water. Porpoises travel in groups with up to 10 porpoises in a group.

Dogfish



These sharks can be up to 4 feet in length and are very abundant in the Gulf of Maine. It is important to be able to recognize these sharks; however, they are completely harmless to humans. They travel in schools and can be found in very shallow waters during the summer season. They have sharp spines on each dorsal fin which can cause injury if the shark feels bothered, however the dogfish only feeds on small fish.

Blue Shark



Blue Sharks are found in the Gulf of Maine during the summer months, typically offshore and occasionally traveling near the shore in pursuit of schools of fish. They can grow up to 12 feet in length and are not a huge threat towards humans; however, their size allows them to get aggressive in any situation. The dorsal fin is hard to distinguish from other sharks; however, the most distinguishing feature of this species is their pectoral fins which are very long.

Mako Shark



Mako sharks are between 6 and 12 feet long. They are distinguishable in that they are dorsally blue and ventrally white. Also, they have long teeth that are visible even when the mouth is not open. They have 2 dorsal fins, one large and one smaller.. As noticeable in the picture, their snouts are very long and pointy. These sharks are not typically found in waters below 61 degrees Fahrenheit; however, it is not rare that they enter the Gulf of Maine during mid-summer months when the water warms up. They feed on large bony fish and occasionally other sharks and they are a threat to humans. Also, these sharks are known for their incredible speed and ability to leap up to 28 feet in the air.

Great White



The Great White Shark is found in the same family as the Mako Shark and is the world's largest predatory fish. A Great White can grow to over 20 feet in length. These sharks are found in waters that range generally between 54 degrees to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Although they are not abundant in the Gulf of Maine, they have been spotted feeding just a couple miles off shore from Wells Beach. Great Whites, like the Mako, have counter-shading, which means they have a white underside and a darker color top (usually grey or brown). Most Great White attacks have been within 2 hours after sunrise and in all attacks the shark has surprised its prey from below. These sharks will come inland only in pursuit of prey, such as porpoises and harbor seals, which are found in abundance along our coastline.

Basking Shark



The Basking Shark is the world's second largest fish, and can be found in waters between 46 degrees and 57 degrees Fahrenheit. A Basking Shark ranges between 20 and 26 feet, however the largest recorded one was 40.6 feet and 9 tons! It is easily distinguishable by the large circular jaw which is used to catch plankton. The dorsal fin can sometimes be so large it flops over when above the surface of the water. Basking sharks are not a threat to humans; however given its size many people are frightened when approached. These sharks are filter feeders and do not prey on any other fish or humans. They travel in schools, generally between 3 and 5, and are known to enter extremely shallow waters, such as that of harbors and breaking waves.

Porbeagle



The Porbeagle is only an occasional visitor to the Gulf of Maine; however, it is still important to be able to recognize if needed. It is generally found in waters between 41 degrees and 50 degrees Fahrenheit, which make it more commonly spotted during the winter months. They can grow up to 12 feet in length and the most distinguishable characteristic would be the white patch at the base of the dorsal fin, as can be seen in this picture. This shark is also known for its speed and generally feeds on small bony fish.

Thresher Shark



Thresher sharks are rarely found in the Gulf of Maine, however they have been spotted before. These sharks are generally up to 20 feet in length with a large, long tail which accounts for about 1/3 of their length and is used to stun their prey. These sharks have not been known to be a threat to humans; however their tail is a threat to anyone that threatens it.

Conclusion

These are some of the most common large species that could be found at Wells Beach, however the ocean is very vast and events such as storms and current changes can throw off many different sea animals feeding patterns. It is because of this that certain fish may enter our water and others may leave. It is highly important to be able to recognize a threat at any point and to be able to distinguish a life-threatening predator from a non-threatening one. In all cases, precautions will be taken if the species is not obvious to identify, and the lifeguard captain will initiate the appropriate measure of the shark plan.

Harbor Seal Image

http://urbanhawks.blogs.com/urban_hawks/general_news/index.html

Porpoise Image

http://www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk/whales_dolphins/harbour-porpoise.asp

Dogfish Image

<http://www.boydski.com/diving/photos/Sharks/Dogfish1.jpg>

Blue Shark Image

http://www.newenglandsharks.com/derived/blue.htm_txt_BLUEbuttermilk.gif

Mako Shark Image

http://newjerseyscuba.net/biology/sw_fish_sharks_offshore.html#Mako

Great White Image

http://www.brandoncole.com/profile%20photos/SHARKS/great%20white/py50068-D-great_white_shark_fin.jpg

Basking Shark Image

http://www.gla.ac.uk/centres/marinestation/graphics/basking_shark_at-surface_425.jpg

Porbeagle Image

<http://edesabata.files.wordpress.com/2007/12/porbeagle-shark.jpg>

Thresher Image

http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/Graphics/OBS/obs_sharks/obs_common_thresher_sharks/obs_common_thresher_shark1.jpg

All information from:

www.wikipedia.com

<http://www.gulfofmaine.org/times/summer2003/sharkgom.htm>

