

ATTACKS

**Unknowable,
unpredictable and
savage, sharks
are nature's
ultimate predators**

BY JOHN N. COLE

If you fish salt waters for even a single season, you will almost certainly meet your shark. You will never forget it, nor its brethren who forever swim silent through your fishing memories.

I see them still, after more than 60 years on the water. I see those great hammerheads of warm-water seas, those schools of magnificent predators stalking pods of silver tarpon on their May and June migrations. They move like pack wolves of the deep, these pelagic sharks, their eyes angry emeralds glowing from the bizarre protuberance that gives the species its name. Relentlessly trailing the nervous tarpon, the hammerheads—10, 12, 15, even 17 feet long—make their kill when shoals rise from the sea and the silver fish can be herded into shallows like terrified deer trapped up a blind canyon.

Anchored 26 miles west of Key West on a warm and windless late-May day in a lagoon just off the Marquesas, I watched the offshore waters darken, ruffled indigo by a squall I knew could not exist. Then tarpon began leaping from the darker sea, one after the other, the full lengths of their gleaming six- and seven-foot torsos suspended above the horizon for a terrified moment before they crashed, the white geysers of their descent marking their desperate efforts at flight.

As the hammerheads worked the school closer to pale shallows, the sharks broke away in twos and singles to run down their quarry. Just to the east of our skiff a huge dorsal rose three feet tall, slicing the surface with implacable speed, throwing a hissing rooster-tail wake. Its prey cornered



Two tuna fishermen swear the mako looked

against the coral shore, the shark became rigid through the torso while its great head struck, stunned and worked its way under the paralyzed tarpon, tossing the 100-pound fish in the air like a silver log, then biting it cleanly in two as it tumbled.

We sat silent in our skiff, awed by the ferocity of the moment. Nibbling at our lunch sandwiches, we watched as a shadow on the distant flats became a living shape gliding toward us. With sinuous motions as fluid as the currents around it, the hammerhead kept coming until it was alongside, almost directly beneath us in a few feet of crystal-clear water. I looked into each of its luminous green eyes as the shark paused, motionless, appearing to deliberate on its options.

Our skiff, I knew, was 17 feet from bow to stern, and that shark spanned most of the distance as it lay there—its dusky length so foreboding against the ivory sand, its girth so charged with force. My breath would not come until the shark's sweeping tail flickered and that hammerhead slid onto the flat, its dorsal and shoulders riding high up to the moment it reached a channel and vanished in the blue unknown.

Jacques Cousteau—the grandfather of scuba diving—said that riding a motorcycle is much more dangerous than diving in tropical seas. Maybe so, but how many of us have been struck dumb by the sight of a Harley? None but the shark brings as much mystery to its relationship with man. There is within us all, still, after all these centuries, a residual fear of the unseen creature, the predator beyond our vision. It is our terrible imaginings that swim with the hammerhead we cannot see.

Capt. Frank Mundus, from Montauk, N.Y., the original "Monster Man" (see "Role Model," October 1996), knows our terrors well. This showman/skipper, who changed the future of charter-boat fishing that day in 1964 when he towed the incredible carcass of a 4,500-pound great white into Montauk Lake, is an expert analyst of our shark psychoses.

Here is Mundus aboard his *Cricket II* explaining great white paralysis to re-



porter Russell Drum: "If I'm down in the cabin looking up to the cockpit, I can tell when a great white shark shows up. The guy doing the chumming, his arm gets stuck."

Like the time late one afternoon, miles offshore of Montauk Point, when the mate, ladling bloody gruel off the *Cricket's* stern, went stone-stiff when he saw what rose from the depths.

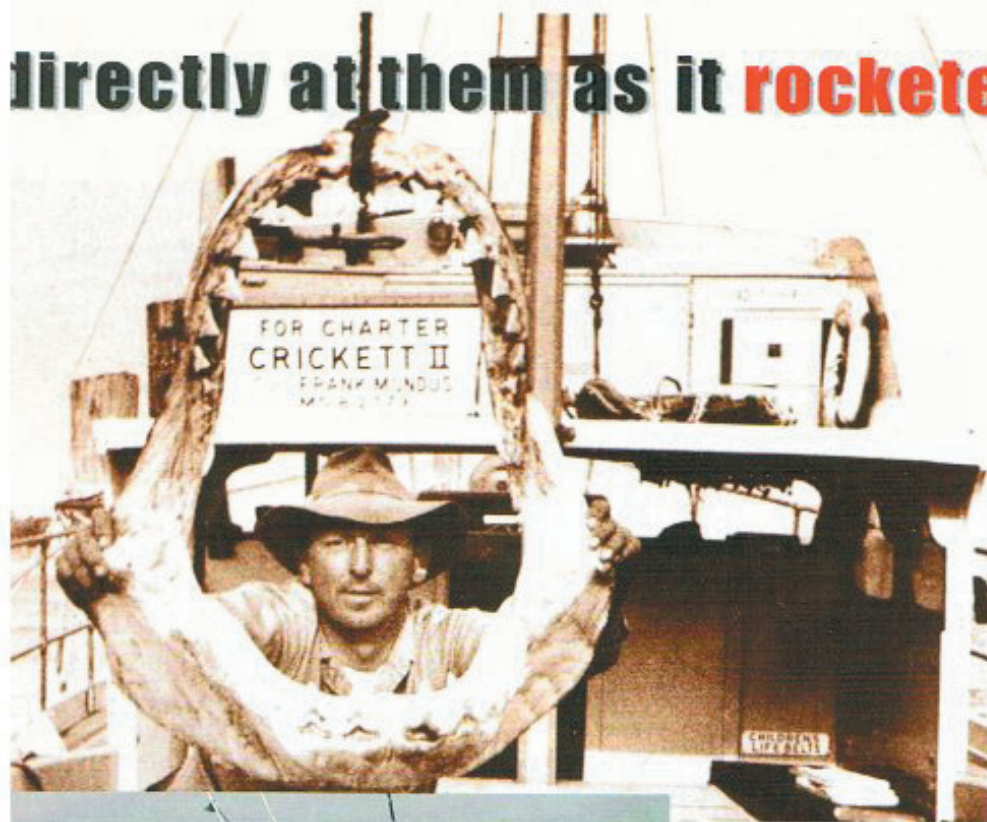
"It would've took a wrecking bar to pry that ladle out of his hand," says Mundus. "That's what a great white will do to you." Experiencing that trill of terror, feeling the charge of adrenaline rush that one-on-one contact with sharks so dependably brings, is part of the reason why shark fishing took saltwater angling by storm during the post-Mundus decades.

All but totally ignored prior to the 1960s, sharks of every species are now sportfishing trophies with space



granted them in the International Game Fish Association's (IGFA) annual record books—34 species total, with line-class records accompanying their listings. There are shark tournaments and shark derbies and shark-fishing specialists at almost every saltwater charter-boat marina from rockbound Maine to sunny San Diego. There is, apparently, no end to the attraction, no denying that frisson of primal fear that

directly at them as it **rocketed into the air.**



Frank Mundus (at top, peering through shark jaws) is credited with creating the boom in recreational shark fishing. Often he baited sharks close to his *Cricket II* with dead whales (top, left). Donnie Braddock caught a 3,427-pound great white (bottom, left) while fishing with Mundus.

arrives with a shark's sudden presence.

It is not only the ferocity we know the shark brings with it, but the menace of its very being that fascinates and frightens. As Frank Mundus shouted to his mate, paralyzed at the sight of the great white, "Boggsy old boy, here comes your imagination!"

Which is one answer to the question: Why does one of Maine's leading striped bass guides leave the Kennebec River's productive (and sheltered) waters to take his flycasting anglers some 20 or 30 miles offshore to fish for sharks?

Because if you're aboard Capt. Dave Pecci's *Obsession* out there on the trackless waters of the Gulf of Maine, there is something undeniably eerie about the arrival of 20 or 30 blue sharks less than half an hour after a

plastic laundry basket full of bloody fish parts is floated off the stern.

These are big, oceanic blue sharks—200- and 300-pounders. "It's just amazing," says Pecci. "There we are, no other boats, nothing out there but ocean. Then a few minutes after the chum goes overboard, here come the sharks. They'll swim right up to the stern and bump against the chum basket. It's kind of spooky when you think about it. I mean, how can they know? How do they find us so quickly out there in all that space?"

Makos and porbeagles share the same waters, but because anglers aboard the *Obsession* sight-cast flies at specific blue sharks, they seldom tangle with these larger relatives in the shark family. But others have...unforgettably so. Like the two anglers chumming and drifting live mackerel off Jeffrey's Ledge four summers ago. Aboard their 34-footer out of Newburyport, Mass., these fishermen specialized in giant tuna. But when they saw the mako's fin rise behind the sewn mackerel bait just off the stern, they knew it was larger than any bluefin they had ever seen.

Opening wide, the mako took the

mackerel, felt the hook and sounded. Eighty-pound-test line ripped off the big tuna reel as the stiff rod bowed in its socket. The two men stared at each other, their eyes large. Neither reached for the rod, both struck dumb at how easily the big fish stripped a reel set at full drag. It would be only a matter of minutes, they were certain, before the shark spooled them.

Then the line slowed and hissed along the surface as the mako rocketed from below. Like a Polaris missile fired from an unseen submarine, the shark shot from the sea *less than 10 feet* off the stern. The men swear it turned its head and looked directly at them as it thrashed the air—spraying water into the cockpit, its jaws snapping at the slack line suspended alongside.

Free, the mako, estimated at more than a thousand pounds, crashed back to the Gulf of Maine, missing the boat's transom by less than two feet as foam from the splash spattered the deck.

Both men stood stock-still, pale as clouds. Minutes passed before one of them realized he had soiled his undershorts.

Sharks can do that. They are the planet's foremost wild predators. Their sensory system, according to Dr. Timothy C. Tricas, a shark biologist at the Florida Institute of Technology, ranks as one of the most advanced among vertebrates, possibly *the* most advanced. Sharks can detect the heartbeat of a flounder buried under the sand, or smell a single drop of fish oil in a quarter-acre lagoon more than six feet deep. Their eyes distinguish colors, and receptors in their snout and lower jaw sense bioelectric fields radiated by other sea creatures. Each of these sensors—most only partially understood, some completely eluding science's comprehension—are coordinated in a large and complex brain. With some 450 million years of evolution to get it right, the shark as predator attains a kind of excellence beyond our understanding, beyond comparison in the wild-animal kingdom.

Which is reason enough for the scores of shark stories you can hear at

Sharks zoomed around the angler, leaving

any of the hundreds of marinas where shark hunters moor their boats.

"Sharks have become the mainstay of our business," says Capt. Mike Potts of the *Bluefin IV*, a brawny charter boat out of Montauk. His rod-and-reel anglers have brought many trophies back to the dock, including a 724-pound tiger shark, a 536-pound dusky and a 613-pound thresher.

But the shark that caused all the trouble was a 710-pound mako. "We brought her alongside, gaffed her, looped on a tail rope and dragged her backwards 30 minutes.

"I put two .30/30 slugs in her, just in back of her head. Then we started hauling her up the gin pole. That shark went nuts. I yelled at everyone to get back. Tried to hold on to her tail. She almost broke my arm...and did dislocate my shoulder.

"Gave her two more from the .30/30, dropped her back in the water, towed her some more. Tried to get her aboard again and she still went bananas, broke the fighting chair off its stand. Put two more slugs in her, towed her for an hour. She finally quit. Drowned.

"I learned something that day. You've got to be ready for anything when you start bringing a big shark into the boat. Everything can go wrong when one of them starts banging around, going crazy.

"The amateurs out here, the first-timers, they're asking for trouble. This boat has baited more than two thousand hammerheads, tigers, duskeys, makos and threshers. We haven't had any more episodes since the one mako. We learned a lesson.

"I scrapped the .30/30 carbine after that. Got myself a full-choke 12-gauge and a case of double-ought bucks. Put a couple of those just in back of a shark's head and they don't make any more fuss."

Anglers who fight sharks from a boat, any boat, have a distinct advantage over those who wade shoal waters, hoping to catch a bonefish or permit. When you're in warm water up to your waist and a shark, any shark, shows up—sinuous, silent, un-



predictable—your heart begins to pound. And if you're male, your scrotum tries to shrink out of sight. I know. I've had mine shrunken. I've been there.

I've never come as close to real danger as Jeffrey Cardenas, however. A former flats-skiff guide and an ardent angler, Jeffrey showed up at our home long after dark one warm, Key West night. His face under the porch light was pale as milk beneath his tan. He raised his right arm to show me what was left of a sizable permit, bitten neatly in half, its blood still dripping on our lawn.

"I had the fish on for almost an hour," Jeffrey told me, his eyes wide. "I waded across a half-mile of flats to keep it from spooling me. When I could finally see it, less than 30 feet away there in the dusk, a shark hit it, a big one.

"The sound of the attack brought other sharks, and there I was in the water up to my chest with a bloody fish on the end of my line and more sharks



Great whites in the four-figures and requiring ship's cradles to haul ashore for weighing (top, right) are rare, but makos (top, left), hammerheads (bottom, right) or lemons on the flats (center) appear all too frequently for fishermen, as Jeffrey Cardenas (lower left) can attest.



on the way. I hauled in what was left of the permit hand over hand, then held it over my head.

"The sharks were zooming, leaving phosphorescent trails as they searched for my fish. I held the bleeding carcass over my head and had to cross a finger channel to get back to my boat. I had to swim with the sharks.

"With one arm holding the fish and my fly rod over my head, I did a sidearm crawl to the skiff, my legs dangling behind me, my heart raging in absolute terror."

Every warm-water angler has more than one shark story. The Caribbean,