

Shark being tracked by GPS off coast of Carolinas captivates online fans

December 6 2012, by John Murawski

If not for the GPS device, no one would know she's here. A great white shark affectionately dubbed Mary Lee by scientists and adopted by thousands of online fans has been using the waters off North Carolina's coast as a private all-you-can-eat buffet.

There's no way of telling if many boaters or tourists have crossed currents with the celebrity shark that's as large and as heavy as a family sedan. Mary Lee's admirers are following her movements at a safe distance - by laptop, iPad and at the office.

Mary Lee is being tracked by a GPS-type device that provides real-time data as to her whereabouts. Dozens of great whites have been tracked this way, but none in the Atlantic, where they are rare, and their subaquatic habits are shrouded in mystery.

Each time the shark's fin breaks the surface of the Atlantic Ocean, the \$1,000 device bolted to its fin signals a satellite, and the shark's position appears on an online map. Some sharks rarely surface, but Mary Lee has come up more than 100 times, sometimes multiple times a day.

The string of dots she has left resembles a hurricane tracker, showing inexplicable stops, reversals, loops and sudden bursts.

Last ping: Tuesday at 9:08 a.m. EST, showing Mary Lee in a holding pattern - or is it a feeding frenzy? - just south of Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Since having her dorsal fin tagged in mid-September by scientists in Cape Cod, Mary Lee has cruised between Wilmington, N.C., and Jacksonville, Fla., throughout October and November. She has hugged the shore in Myrtle Beach, paid her respects to Cape Fear, and slipped in and out of inlets at Bald Head Island.

"This is the real-life Jaws, bro," said Chris Fischer, project manager at OCEARCH, the [scientific organization](#) that tagged the fish. "I believe that Mary Lee is the most legendary fish caught in history."

Shark aficionados grind their mandibles at the mention of the bestselling book and blockbuster movie that portrayed their beloved sharks as predatory monsters and man-eaters. Fischer and his colleagues are tracking Mary Lee to learn where great whites breed and give birth so that she and her watery kin can be protected.

A threat to humans? Mostly hype, Fischer said. Great whites don't attack people - except when mistaking them for seals or other prey.

Nothing pleases Fischer more than the viral craze and resulting news attention showered on Mary Lee. The OCEARCH site has been overwhelmed by as many as 2,000 unique visitors in one hour and 75,000 last week.

Among the engrossed is Jo O'Keefe of Carolina Shores, N.C., a marine life enthusiast, who checks in on Mary Lee at least three times a day and promptly updates friends and reporters on Mary Lee's status.

"They are thrilled to hear about Mary Lee because she's massive," O'Keefe said. "I wanted the public everywhere she went to share the excitement of a macrocosmic experience."

Great whites are presumed to follow two-year migratory loops, traveling

thousands of miles, Fischer said, but almost nothing is known about these apex predators that rule the waterways.

It's also assumed that Mary Lee is a habitue of the East Coast, not an interloper from another part of the globe, but nothing is certain.

"How big is their world? What does their neighborhood look like?" said Greg Skomal, a leading shark authority and senior scientist at the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries. "In essence we're studying their life history."

The tracking device has a life expectancy of five years, plenty of time for Mary Lee to give a guided tour of her domain.

"We've known there's these places in the world where white sharks show up and people see them," Fischer said. "But they have no idea where they came from, what they're doing, or where they go to when they're not there."

Fischer and his crew can haul a mature shark aboard their floating laboratory, take blood samples, tissue samples and bacteria scrapings, all the while calming the giant fish by covering its eyes with a wet cloth and running a water hose into its mouth.

The whereabouts of Mary Lee, and other sharks tagged by OCEARCH, can be tracked at sharks-ocearch.verite.com/

The site shows location at Greenwich Mean Time, which is five hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time.

(c)2012 The News & Observer (Raleigh, N.C.)

Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Shark being tracked by GPS off coast of Carolinas captivates online fans (2012, December 6) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-12-shark-tracked-gps-coast-carolinas.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.