

New species of shark found off South Carolina coast

August 13 2013, by Sammy Fretwell

Scientists have discovered a new species of shark in the ocean off South Carolina and have named it for the region where it was found.

The "Carolina hammerhead," thought to reach 11 feet long and weigh about 400 pounds, has been identified cruising the waters at Bull's Bay north of Charleston, St. Helena Sound near Beaufort and in the Charleston harbor.

But biologists suspect these [hammerheads](#) occur worldwide, since evidence of them has been found in the past from Brazil to the Indian Ocean. The number of Carolina hammerheads is thought to be small.

"It is a [distinct species](#)," said William "Trey" Driggers, a marine scientist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's fisheries division.

Driggers, a 45-year-old Sumter, S.C., native and Clemson University graduate, was among a team of scientists with NOAA, the University of South Carolina, the University of New Orleans and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources who made the discovery after more than a decade of research.

Much of the work was done in the laboratory of University of South Carolina professor Joseph Quattro, he said. Veterinarians in Columbia also collaborated on the discovery.

Driggers said it's almost impossible to tell the difference between a Carolina hammerhead and the well-known scalloped hammerhead - except for one major distinction: The newly identified species has fewer [vertebrae](#) than its shark cousins.

Carolina hammerheads have 83 to 91 vertebrae, while scalloped hammerheads have 92 to 99 vertebrae.

While the distinction between scalloped and Carolina hammerheads is subtle, NOAA officials say it's significant to conservation of the [species](#). Scalloped hammerhead numbers are dwindling in some areas, so Carolina hammerhead numbers would be even fewer, they said.

Evidence of a hammerhead with fewer vertebrae dates to a single reference in a 1967 research paper, but only in the past decade have scientists obtained more detailed information. Recently, they concluded that the Carolina hammerhead is separate from the [scalloped hammerhead](#).

Some 56 sharks used to identify the Carolina hammerhead were all collected off the South Carolina coast.

Carolina and scalloped hammerheads are the second largest sharks found in Palmetto State waters, behind the great hammerhead. The animals are distinguished by their wide, anvil-like heads.

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