

University's aerial survey finds sharks in Cornwall's waters

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Recent surveys around Cornwall's coast have revealed the presence of large numbers of giant basking sharks. Scientists from the University of Exeter's Cornwall Campus and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) spotted 18 sharks off south-west Cornwall in just two hours on Friday 10 August.

'It is wonderful to witness the return of these spectacular animals around our coastline,' said Peter Richardson, MCS Species Policy Officer and University of Exeter post-graduate student. 'During the aerial survey we also saw common dolphins, which, along with the basking sharks have been mistaken for Great White Sharks during the recent media feeding frenzy. We didn't expect to see Great White Sharks and needless to say we didn't spot any!'

The University of Exeter and MCS aerial surveys are funded by the European Social Fund, with additional support from MCS and PADI Project AWARE. Friday's aerial survey also detected sunfish, and previous surveys have recorded bottlenose dolphins, harbour porpoises and grey seals. Through the aerial surveys, the team hopes to understand the distribution and seasonality of the different species of wildlife using Cornwall's waters, and also inform the local marine wildlife watching industry that is fast becoming a local tourism attraction.

'These basking shark sightings indicate that Cornish waters are an important summer hotspot for this protected species. Basking sharks have become a significant tourist attraction for Cornwall, but anyone

wishing to see these amazing animals should go with a WiSe-accredited wildlife watching trip in order to avoid unnecessary and illegal disturbance to them,' said Dr Ruth Leeney, researcher at the University of Exeter's Cornwall Campus.

The basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*) is the second largest fish in the sea, much larger than a great white, growing in excess of 11m and weighing up to 7 tonnes. They are regular visitors to British coasts, where each summer they return to feed harmlessly on inshore plankton blooms. Since 1987, MCS has run a separate project Basking Shark Watch, which encourages public reporting of basking sharks. In the last 20 years MCS has accumulated over 10,500 public sightings of basking sharks in UK waters, but no confirmed reports of great white sharks. Last week, MCS Basking Shark Watch received several basking shark reports from Cornish waters, with one sailor reporting large groups of sharks between Land's End and the Scilly Isles on Thursday. On Friday observers at the National Coastwatch Institution at Bass Point, Lizard saw 19 sharks, while over the weekend Seawatch SW recorded 14 shark sightings at Gwennap Head near Land's End.

Basking sharks are protected under national law and while MCS encourages the public to report their sightings, they also warn people not to get too close to the gentle giants.

Source: University of Exeter

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