

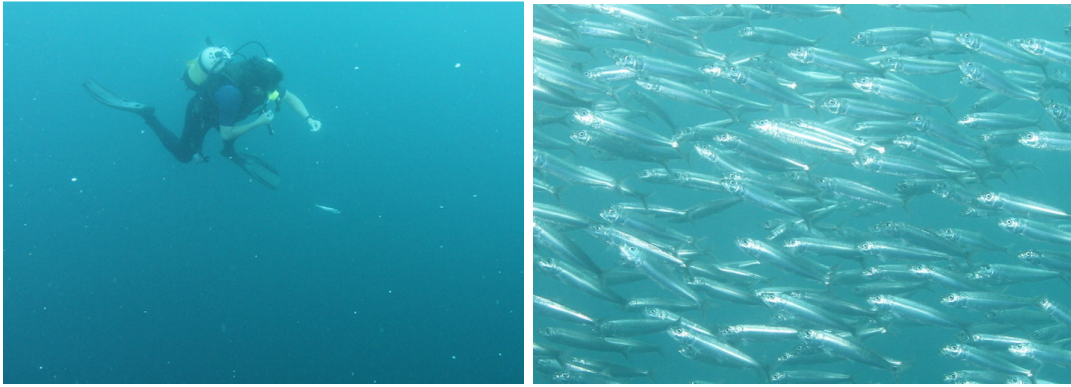
Copper too, what a cracker!

Sorry about the missed blog yesterday; but after another successful day of shark trekking, a late finish and an early braai/ fire beckoning, the blog was never going to happen.



So, I will catch up with yesterday's news first. We headed out once again to the 2nd Beach / Sugarloaf area, and were happy to find another baitball. This ball was a little larger than the day before and had a fair few sharks swimming through it, and about 30 common dolphins working it. We did, once again, see two Bryde's whales on the fringes of the activity, but they did not swim through the activity this time. I was given the job of feeding the tag-bait to a shark, and this proved to be quite a tricky affair. The sharks that swam near the bait seems a little timid with myself and Will hanging over the bait, whereas the school of bonito had no such inhibitions. It was all I could do to prevent a bonito from snatching our bait, which would have meant \$1500 worth of wasted tags! Luckily this did not happen, and a copper shark about 2 m grabbed the bait and swallowed his tags. We were set for another day of ping-ping-follow-the-shark!





Wednesday's shark was an easy (if slightly uneventful) tag. Not so, yesterday's little beauty! At first he stayed with the baitball for about half an hour, and then he took off in a north easterly direction; parallel with the coastline, but swimming in progressively deeper water. After about half an hour we crossed a current line, and then the shark's behaviour changed. He started zig-zagging across the current line, which made tracking him very difficult. Then, after swimming in a generally easterly direction for about one and a half hours, he turned about 150 ° and started headed shorewards. In the distance, we later measured it to be 800 m, we saw gannets diving into the water, at what was obviously a baitball. Our shark swam all the way directly towards this activity. When we got to this activity, it consisted of three different baitballs (and about 6 sardine run tourist boats), all of which the shark visited.



Thereafter, our shark headed in an easterly direction again. Whilst doing this, he sped up and changed direction and we lost him. We spent the following hour doing a large circular search, and then revisited our GPS trackline. We were just about to give up the search, when we heard a weak little ping-ping-ping on the VR100 listening station. We'd found our shark again, and where was he heading? Straight back towards the ball he'd left an hour before. We were stoked! He revisited this ball for about another 20 minutes and then headed shorewards. Once again, in the distance we could see a lot of gannets working the colour line in front of the Mzimvubu Mouth. This is where our shark headed. He stayed there for about 15 – 20 minutes and then headed straight back out to our previous position. Methinks this shark had a method (memory?) of returning to a previously good feeding area. Foraging strategy?



This morning was a real beauty. Very little wind and no clouds in the sky. When we got past the surf, we saw a lot of activity to the east with about 300 gannets diving over dolphins. Once we'd got out to it, we saw that it was a mixed pod of bottlenose and common dolphins, and that the gannet diving was scattered. Under these conditions, the bait balls don't often seem to form, and within 10 minutes the area was dead calm again. Later we did encounter another baitball, and there were at least a dozen sharks swimming below it. However, another boat load arrived and emptied onto the ball, and the sharks disappeared. In truth, the ball was probably a bit small for us to consider it useful anyway. It was a very pleasant dive, and I did observe some bottlenose dolphin feeding on the ball, which is quite unusual.



We did not manage to deploy a tag today, and want to keep our last remaining tag for a nice solid bait ball that will last a few hours. We'd like to get more information about what sharks do on the ball, and less of eternally following them through the sea. Have a super weekend.

All photos courtesy of Will Robbins and Rod Haestier.