



THUG: THE BULL SHARK

BY
Jerald Horst

The bull shark may be the most common inshore/nearshore shark in the northern Gulf, rivaled in number only by the blacktip shark. Typically, blacktips are smaller, with a more slender body shape, a more pointed nose and black tips on their fins. The bull shark is the species implicated in the attacks on humans in the northern Gulf in 2001.

The species, scientifically known as *Carcharhinus leucas*, is found worldwide in warm seas. It is also the third most common species involved in attacks on humans worldwide, behind only the great white and tiger sharks. It is not nearly as well known as the huge two-toned, torpedo-shaped great white shark or the attractively-striped tiger shark, with its graceful arched tail fin. The bull sharks dull gray color, stubby body shape and blunt nose resembles – well, a thug. Adding to this image is its reputation for aggressiveness and its preference for low-salinity, murky estuarine waters.

Not only do bull sharks prefer low-salinity waters, they can in fact, thrive in completely fresh water. They have been found as far up the Mississippi River as St. Louis, Missouri. They have been found 2000 miles up the Amazon River and in freshwater Lake Nicaragua, where they are recognized as dangerous sharks, both in the lake and in the river connecting it to the sea.

While research on the bull shark is not complete, it is known that large females seek out low-salinity estuaries and river mouths to bear their 1 to 10 living young, typically between April and June. The pup's measure 29 inches at birth and are born fully armed with teeth. They stay in low-salinity waters about six years, feeding and growing until 4 to 5 feet in length. Bull sharks will grow to 11 feet long and live at least 20 years. They eat almost any type of fish or shellfish, but seem to prefer rays, including stingrays and other sharks. Fishermen have found that one of the best baits for bull sharks is fresh shark flesh.

A Texas A&M University researcher has identified Sabine Pass, between Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, and Jefferson County, Texas, as a nursery area used by hundreds of female bull sharks to give birth each year. However, most of Louisiana's coastal waters are believed to serve the same purpose. Bull sharks are so common in Louisiana estuaries that almost any shark without black tips on its fins that is caught inshore is likely to be a bull shark. Often these are called "sand sharks", a catchall term for any small shark. Worldwide, over 350 species of sharks exist; not one of them is a species called a sand shark.