Our Ocean Backyard

Gary Griggs

Column No. 357

Shark Attack Risk is Low

An ominous sign greeted any visitors to the beach immediately north of Morro Rock on Christmas Eve – “Fatal Shark Attack”. A 31-year-old male victim was found floating face down about 10:30 am not far from his boogie board by a woman who was surfing along Morro Strand State Beach. While there were no witnesses, the Morro Bay Harbor Director stated that it was clearly a shark attack, and is usually the case, “likely involved a great white”.

Of the roughly 350 species of sharks found in the oceans today, only 35 of those have ever been known to attack humans, and only four are recognized as significant threats. Great white sharks seem to gather the most attention because they are more common in US and Australian waters and because they have been responsible for more attacks on humans than any other type of shark. They live in almost all coastal and offshore waters around the planet that have water temperatures between about 54 and 75 degrees F., with greatest concentrations in the coastal waters of South Africa, Japan, Oceania, Chile, the Mediterranean, California, and the southeastern United States. While an attack from any of the four most dangerous sharks (great white shark, stiped tiger shark, bull shark, and blacktip shark) has the potential to be deadly, fatalities from shark bites are surprisingly rare relative to almost any other risks we take in our daily lives. I hope this is making you all feel a little better.

The December 24th Morro Bay victim was the only fatal shark attack in all US waters in 2021. There were a total of eight deaths from sharks globally this past year, with three of those being in Australia. In 2020, there were three fatalities from sharks in the United States: in Maui, Hawaii; off Bailey Island, Maine; and locally at Manresa Beach. The latter was the first fatal shark attack ever recorded in Monterey Bay. In the ten years from 2011 to 2020, there were just seven fatal shark attacks in the US (less than one per year), although 448 nonfatal encounters.

Records from the International Shark Attack File kept at the Florida Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida, indicate that in 2020, surfers and others participating in board sports accounted for 61 percent of all US shark attacks. People swimming and wading accounted for 26 percent of attacks, while the others involved scuba divers, free divers, snorkelers, and body surfers.

In California, since 1900, there have been only 180 confirmed unprovoked attacks or encounters with great white sharks. This is an average of only 1.5 per year. Considering the millions of beachgoers, swimmers, surfers, divers and others in the state’s coastal waters, this is a remarkably small number. In the last 40 years, there have been ten fatalities along the state’s coast, all believed to be from great whites. This translates to one fatality every four years on average. For comparison, during just four weeks of the winter of 2020-2021, ten people died along California’s Central Coast after being swept off rocks or caught by large waves along the shoreline.

The odds of being attacked by a shark during a beach visit in the US is about one in 11.5 million. The probability of being killed by a shark is one in 264 million. This is not to say that great white sharks don’t pose any danger to humans in the water, but relative to virtually anything else you can imagine, the risk of a fatal shark attack is extremely low.

Sixteen people die on average annually from dog bites in the United States while 62 die each year from bee, wasp or hornet stings.

Covid to date has taken the lives of 815,000 people in the US. Then there were the accidental deaths: in the 12-month period ending in April 2021, there were an estimated 100,000 deaths from drug overdoses; automobile accidents take over 40,000 lives each year and guns take another 39,000; about 37,000 people die from falls and 3,700 from drowning.

The National Safety Council reports that cell phone use while driving leads to about 1.6 million automobile accidents each year. One out of every four automobile accidents in the US is caused by texting and driving and results in nearly 390,000 injuries annually. In 2018, 2,841people died in car crashes linked to distracted driving.

So what’s the message Gary? Being out in the water, whether surfing, swimming or diving, is healthier and safer than almost any other activity you could imagine.