

● **BREAKING** TORNADO OBSERVED ON RADAR IN YARMOUTH,
WEATHER SERVICE SAYS

BREAKING: TORNADO OBSERVED ON RADAR IN YARMOUTH,
WEATHER SERVICE SAYS

Just passing through: Why sharks don't seem to stop in Rhode Island on their way to Cape Cod

By **Amanda Milkovits** Globe Staff, Updated July 23, 2019, 6:00 a.m.



Easton Beach in Newport, R.I. (NICHOLAS PFOSI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE 2017)

Sign up to receive a [daily briefing](#) on our Rhode Island coverage in your inbox each morning. Tell us your [tips, thoughts, and ideas here](#).

PROVIDENCE — It's not as though Rhode Island's 400 miles of coastline are any less attractive than the beaches of Cape Cod.

But those menacing Atlantic white sharks that frighten folks on the Cape seem to stay away from the Ocean State.

The great predators of the ocean would rather eat seals, not swimmers, and there just aren't enough of the former in the waters off Rhode Island to make the sharks stick around in the summertime, shark researchers say.

So, white sharks are passing by Rhode Island for better seal-hunting grounds off Cape Cod and northern waters — alarming beachgoers there almost daily.

ADVERTISING



Replay

Even so, visitors to Rhode Island's beaches still get nervous about what's lurking beneath.

At Narragansett Surf & Skate Shop, Tricia Pan said she can tell when the Discovery Channel is airing "Shark Week" just by looking at her bookings for surf lessons.

"I'm like, 'Why are there no lessons?'" Pan said, at her family's shop Friday. "It's 'Shark Week.' [People] don't book, they cancel or it's a no-show. It's a serious, primal fear — people are petrified of sharks."

Without basis. Pan has been surfing Rhode Island since childhood, and at 40, says she's never seen a shark. "And I could never tell you any surfer who's seen a shark in Rhode Island," she added.

While fishermen far off shore occasionally report pulling up a white shark in a trawl or fish trap, the real thing isn't common within swimming and surfing range.

Still, all the publicity about sharks skimming near beaches along Cape Cod has an effect. On July 3, state officials decided to limit swimming at busy Salty Brine State Beach and Roger Wheeler State Beach in Narragansett, after a swimmer and a lifeguard reported seeing a "fin" cutting through the water.

Was it a white shark? No marine biologist was there to confirm. Jason McNamee, the chief of the division of marine fisheries at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, said it could have been a case of mistaken identity.

"It's on people's minds, so they're looking for it more than they would have been in the past," McNamee said. "We certainly have sharks in the area — there's more diversity of sharks here than in the Cape, which has a lot of white sharks. But we are kind of at this nexus of a warmer water ecosystem and cooler water ecosystem to the north, so it could have been another species of shark."

Or, a dolphin. Or, even a giant sunfish placidly cruising below the surface.

Rhode Island hasn't had a reported fatal shark attack since August 1895, when a man from Roxbury, Mass., swimming from a yacht about a mile off Westerly's Noyes Point was suddenly dragged under water by something.

"It is believed that [he] was caught by the foot by one of the great school of sharks now running in the Sound and in Narragansett Bay, a four-hundred-pounder being captured Tuesday morning at Sabins Point," the Globe reported at the time.

In Massachusetts, a man was killed by a shark off Wellfleet last September. It was the first fatal shark attack in Massachusetts since 1936.

Despite those limited instances, plus the reputation created by the movie "Jaws," researchers say sharks aren't interested in people.

"We're some unnatural thing they come across," said Bradley Wetherbee, a shark researcher at the University of Rhode Island. "They bite a human and think, 'That's not a seal.' They don't bite someone's leg off or swallow a person. They mistake it for a seal and move on."

The range for white sharks extends along the Atlantic Coast, and Rhode Island is close to their summer feeding area, off Cape Cod, so they're traveling through or close to Rhode Island to get to their northern destination.

No one knows for sure why the white sharks are passing Rhode Island by, said Wetherbee, but there's "high speculation" that it is related to their favorite food -- the gray seals.

The seals travel south when it's colder, but when the water warms up in May, they move on to Massachusetts and further north, he said. The seals go to colder water in the north, following the herring. They haul out on undisturbed beaches, like Monomoy Island and the National Seashore on the Cape, he said.

Where the seals go, the sharks will follow.

Since the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972, seal populations have rebounded, returning them to areas in the Northeast where they haven't been seen in nearly a century. And, as white sharks eat seals, this has meant a comeback for the great predator.

Their return in great numbers is a sign of a healthier ocean and, instead of being feared, could be celebrated.

"There are 100 million sharks killed by humans every year," said Wetherbee. "If you ask me, that's what people should be worried about."

Fear over shark sightings on the Cape and the fatal attack in Massachusetts last year prompted Rhode Island state marine officials to develop a "shark program."

While the risk of shark attack is "really low," the state has a response system at the beaches, so people feel safe, said McNamee.

The state is also launching a study of its sharks, through a partnership with the Atlantic Shark Institute, and working with the operators of floating fish traps to get reports on any kinds of sharks they encounter.

As in Massachusetts, where state shark expert Greg Skomal is tagging sharks and conducting research with the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy about the animals' hunting and feeding behavior, Rhode Island wants to also build a database of its sharks' habits. Rhode Island will begin contributing to a network for a database of the East Coast, to better understand how the sharks and other marine life are traveling through New England, McNamee said.

With the Atlantic Shark Institute, the state has positioned acoustic monitors at several locations, but are not yet able to post the "pings" picked up by the monitors on social media channels, said DEM spokesman Michael Healey.

While there's no legal obligation for commercial fishermen to report when they catch sharks incidentally, the state is working on a protocol to connect with fishermen when they do happen to pull up sharks, so marine biologists can investigate and possibly tag the creatures.

Rhode Island has developed a grant to pay for the tags and has connected with Skomal to share information with Massachusetts, McNamee said.

"This is first time we've made a significant push at collecting more information, designating staff at fisheries to focus on sharks," he said.

Last year, a Rhode Island fisherman caught a juvenile Atlantic white shark estimated to be about 6 feet long and weighing between 250 and 350 pounds. The state marine scientists estimated the shark was caught at a depth of 60 to 120 feet, well offshore and a normal range for a shark.

While Rhode Island's first comprehensive "shark program" was inspired by the sightings in Massachusetts, that fisherman's capture, three-quarters of a mile off Misquamicut Beach in Westerly, made McNamee wonder if there was a cohort of juvenile sharks coming through.

"While we don't have white sharks now," he said, "maybe we will in the future."

Amanda Milkovits can be reached at amanda.milkovits@globe.com

[Show 39 comments](#)