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VISITING CAPE COD

Great White Sharks on Cape Cod: What Visitors Need to Know

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



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Great white sharks on Cape Cod are not a rumor, a media exaggeration, or a rare curiosity. They are a genuine, predictable, and now well-studied seasonal presence along the Outer Cape's Atlantic shore — and if you are visiting between July and October, you should understand why they are here, where they concentrate, and how to enjoy the water responsibly.

This guide is honest, not alarmist. The ocean is still swimmable. Millions of people wade, swim, and bodyboard along Cape Cod beaches every summer without incident. But the rules have changed, beach culture has shifted, and the informed visitor is a safer visitor.

Why Great White Sharks Are Here

The short answer: gray seals.

A gray seal haul-out colony has established itself on the outer beaches south of Chatham — particularly along Monomoy Island and the barrier bars extending south from South Beach. In 2000, the population was estimated at roughly 5,000 animals. Today, biologists put that number above 50,000. This is one of the fastest-growing pinniped populations on the U.S. East Coast, and it is a direct consequence of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, which ended the commercial hunting that had driven seals to near-local extinction.

Gray seals are the primary prey item for white sharks in the Northwest Atlantic. A single adult gray seal can weigh 700 pounds and represents a dense, calorie-rich food source. Where seals are, sharks follow. It is that straightforward.

White sharks began returning to Cape Cod waters in meaningful numbers around 2009 and 2010. By 2012, the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy was formally established in Chatham — the epicenter of seal activity — to study and track the population. What researchers have documented since is a predictable seasonal migration: sharks follow the seals north from warmer Mid-Atlantic waters each summer, concentrate along the Outer Cape's Atlantic coast from roughly July through October, and move south again as water temperatures drop in the fall.

When Sharks Are Most Active

Peak season: August and September.

Water temperatures along the Atlantic-facing Outer Cape beaches reach their warmest from late July through early September, and this is when tagging data from the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy shows the highest density of white shark detections. July marks the ramp-up; October is the tail end, with activity tapering as water cools below the low 60s.

Sharks are most likely to be in the nearshore zone — within a few hundred yards of the beach — during early morning and late afternoon hours. Dawn and dusk are feeding windows for predators generally, and they correlate with the times when seals are most active near shore.

Which Beaches Have the Highest Shark Activity

The pattern is consistent: **Atlantic-facing beaches on the Outer Cape carry the highest risk**, because these are the beaches closest to the primary seal colonies. Bay-side beaches — the calm, west-facing shores where you

watch the sunset over Cape Cod Bay — have recorded virtually no white shark activity, because seals do not haul out in significant numbers on that side.

The beaches with the most documented activity include:

- **Nauset Beach (Orleans/Chatham line)** — A long barrier beach with direct Atlantic exposure. One of the most heavily monitored beaches on the Cape.
- **Coast Guard Beach (Eastham)** — Part of Cape Cod National Seashore. Excellent swimming beach with active drone surveillance.
- **Marconi Beach (Wellfleet)** — Named for the historic wireless station; long stretch of Atlantic beach within the National Seashore.
- **Cahoon Hollow Beach (Wellfleet)** — A popular, town-managed beach known for the Beachcomber restaurant on the bluff above. Atlantic-facing.
- **Race Point Beach (Provincetown)** — Located at the very tip of the Cape, where the Atlantic and Cape Cod Bay waters converge. Seal populations are present offshore.

If you want to minimize any chance of encountering a shark, swim at bay-side or sound-side beaches. Old Silver Beach in Falmouth, Skaket Beach in Orleans (bay side), or Corporation Beach in Dennis all face west toward Cape Cod Bay and lack the seal-rich conditions that attract white sharks.

How to Stay Safe

Local authorities, the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy, and the National Seashore have developed a layered response system since 2012. Here is what every visitor needs to know:

Download the SHARKTIVITY app (free, iOS and Android) before you arrive. This is the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy’s official public tool. It shows real-time and recent shark sightings, tagged shark detections via underwater acoustic receivers, and beach closure notifications. Check it every morning before you head to the beach.

Heed flags and drone warnings. Many Outer Cape beaches now fly a black-and-white shark warning flag when a shark has been spotted within the past 24 hours. A solid red flag means the beach is closed to swimming. Drone operators — part of town-funded shark spotter programs — will broadcast alerts over bullhorns when a shark is spotted in the nearshore zone. When the drone speaks, exit the water calmly but promptly.

Do not swim near seals. If you see seals on the beach or in the water near you, exit the water. Seals attract white sharks. This is the single most actionable piece of advice. If the seals are thick, the sharks may not be far behind.

Avoid dawn and dusk in the water. These are peak shark feeding hours and the times when visibility for both shark and swimmer is reduced.

Do not wear shiny jewelry in the water. Reflective metal can mimic the flash of fish scales in certain light conditions.

Stay in groups and avoid the sandbars. Sharks cruise the outer sandbars, which parallel many Outer Cape beaches. Avoid swimming beyond the first sandbar. Sandbars concentrate baitfish, which concentrate seals, which attract sharks.

The Atlantic White Shark Conservancy

Headquartered in Chatham, the **Atlantic White Shark Conservancy (AWSC)** is the primary research and public education organization focused on white sharks in the Northwest Atlantic. Their Chatham Shark Center — a

free visitor education center on Main Street in Chatham — is genuinely worth a stop, especially if you have children. The center explains the biology of white sharks, shows real-time tracking data, and gives context that converts fear into understanding.

AWSC researchers have tagged more than 200 individual white sharks in the Atlantic, allowing long-term tracking of movement patterns, population size estimates, and habitat use. Their acoustic receiver network along the Outer Cape coast feeds data directly into the SHARKTIVITY app.

If you want to understand this ecosystem rather than just avoid it, a visit to the Shark Center is the best hour you can spend in Chatham.

Has Anyone Been Attacked?

Yes — and the honest answer requires naming the facts without sensationalizing them.

In **August 2018**, Arthur Medici, a 26-year-old man, was fatally attacked while boogie boarding at Newcomb Hollow Beach in Wellfleet. It was the first shark fatality on Cape Cod in approximately 80 years. The attack occurred in water approximately chest-deep, near a sandbar where seals had been observed.

In **September 2019**, a man was attacked by a white shark while swimming at Long Nook Beach in Truro. He survived, thanks in part to immediate bystander response and proximity to emergency services.

These two incidents, occurring in consecutive years, accelerated significant changes in how beach towns on the Outer Cape manage public safety — including the expansion of drone surveillance programs, updated flag systems, improved first-aid protocols at beach parking lots, and broader public education campaigns.

How Beach Culture Has Changed

Anyone who visited Outer Cape beaches before 2012 and returns today will notice a different atmosphere. The changes are real and permanent.

Drone programs now operate at several beaches during peak season. White-painted quadcopters circle above the surf line, with operators watching live video feeds from the beach. When a shark is spotted, the beach is cleared within minutes.

Black-and-white shark warning flags fly routinely at Nauset, Coast Guard, Marconi, Cahoon Hollow, and other beaches. A flag flying does not mean a shark is in the water right now — it means one was detected recently enough to warrant elevated caution.

No-swimming zones extend to roughly 300 feet from shore on many beaches — enough to keep swimmers out of the primary sandbar zone where shark activity is most frequently observed.

Local towns have invested heavily in beach patrol staffing, radio communication between lifeguards and drone operators, and AED/tourniquet kits at beach access points. The 2018 fatality made clear that standard lifeguard training was not sufficient for a shark-attack response, and protocols have been updated accordingly.

The Outer Cape beaches remain beautiful, wild, and worth visiting. The shifts in culture are a rational response to a real ecological change, not panic. Locals have largely adapted — they swim, surf, and wade — but with awareness and within the flag system.

FAQ

Q: Is it safe to swim at Cape Cod beaches?

Swimming at Cape Cod beaches is generally safe, but safety depends heavily on which beach you choose and what conditions are present that day. Bay-side and sound-side beaches carry minimal shark risk. Atlantic-facing Outer Cape beaches require more caution. Check the SHARKTIVITY app each morning, obey all flags and drone announcements, and avoid swimming near seal activity. Most visitors complete entire trips to the Outer Cape without any shark encounter of any kind.

Q: Which Cape Cod beaches are safest from shark activity?

Bay-facing beaches on the western side of the Cape have the lowest shark risk. Good options include Skaket Beach in Orleans (Cape Cod Bay), Sandy Neck Beach in Barnstable (Cape Cod Bay), Craigville Beach in Centerville (Nantucket Sound), and Corporation Beach in Dennis. These beaches face west — you will watch sunsets over the water — and the seal colonies that attract white sharks are located on the opposite, Atlantic-facing side of the Cape.

Q: What should I do if I see a shark in the water?

Exit the water calmly and without splashing. Alert the lifeguard or beach patrol immediately. Do not re-enter the water until officials have given the all-clear. If you are far from shore when you spot a shark, swim in slowly and deliberately — avoid erratic movement.

Q: Are there sharks on the bay side of Cape Cod?

Documented white shark activity on the Cape Cod Bay side is extremely rare. The gray seal colonies that drive white shark presence on the Outer Cape are located on the Atlantic-facing barrier beaches and offshore islands south and east of Chatham — not on the bay side. Researchers and wildlife officials consistently describe bay-side beaches as low-risk.

Q: Where can I learn more about Cape Cod's white sharks?

The **Atlantic White Shark Conservancy Shark Center** in Chatham is the best in-person resource. It is free and open to the public during summer months. The **SHARKTIVITY app** (free download) provides real-time sighting data. The AWSC website (atlanticwhiteshark.org) publishes research summaries, tagging data, and safety guidelines. The **OCEARCH SharkTracker** is a separate tracking tool that shows movements of white sharks tagged by OCEARCH researchers, including several individuals detected off Cape Cod.

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