

# **All in a day's walk or That time I saved a shark**

At first I thought it was dead. Maybe it was something discarded by a fisherman. Maybe it was half eaten by gulls with just the good side tuned my way. I couldn't tell. I was still too far away to see detail beyond a vague fish shape carried in by a larger wave and deposited on the sand as the water receded.

A few steps closer and it was clearly a full fish. Then it was clearly a little more than a foot long, smooth, and gray, with eyes on the outer edges of a flat, curved head. I was staring down at a baby shovelhead shark.

As soon as I saw what it was, I did what I always do when I see something new (or newly dead) on the beach. I took a photo. I don't know if it was the shutter sound or my presence but something caused the shark to move. No longer a limp carcass on the sand, the shark lifted his head and twisted toward me, just as I took a second pic.

What happened next was a series of hilariously uncharacteristic actions on my part that slurred together into a surrealistic event that I would sum up in five short words when my husband walked up to me several minutes later.

"I just saved a shark!"

"What?"

First, I should explain that it's not unusual for members of our family to rescue creatures of all sizes and habitats that find themselves lost, in need, or otherwise distressed. Our first family pet was a malnourished shelter rescue kitten. There was that summer when my husband and son managed to keep our front yard mowed while simultaneously protecting a nest of baby rabbits. And our daughter has repatriated many a stray praying mantis, butterfly, lady bug or beetle that found its way into houses or pools over the years. Since we relocated to the Sunshine state, frogs, toads, and lizards have been added to the list of hoppers and crawlers that we've scooped up and released back into the wild. At the beach we've returned more than a few stranded starfish to the sea, and this spring my daughter plucked a crab from a boxed in corner and helped him find the sand again.

This is what we do. Usually, however, it's my husband, daughter, or son that does the actual scooping, plucking, grabbing, and releasing, not because I am squeamish but

because I am slow. I'm either late to the party altogether, or wasting time assessing the situation while someone else swoops in and takes action.

But when the baby shark lifted its head, alerting me to the fact that it was alive, I was the only one around. The beach was completely empty for at least half a mile south--the direction I'd just walked from--and a glance north revealed my husband was still well out of shouting range. I was on my own.

Balancing my iPhone in one hand with a perfect sand dollar I'd liberated from the shore earlier in my walk, I reached down, gently rolled the shark onto its belly, and grabbed him right behind the first dorsal fin. As I picked him up he swung his head side to side, trying to wiggle free of my grasp. Apparently he didn't think being up in the air was an improvement on writhing in the sand. By this point, however, I was determined to put him back where he belonged, so I tightened my grip and followed that with the most logical next step. I spoke full sentences out loud to a baby shovelhead shark.

"Hold still! I'm taking you back to your home."

It worked. Or he'd been out of the ocean way too long. Or both. Whatever the truth of it was he remained still for the rest of our journey. I waded knee deep so that he wouldn't immediately be washed back ashore, placed him in the sea, and let go.

At first nothing happened. Then he listed to his left side and I thought I was too late. But suddenly his tail flipped sideways, he righted himself, and he swam back and forth in front of me a couple of times. Instinctively, I stuck my hand back in the water behind his tail and made that shooing motion all Moms make to encourage slow children, dogs, cats, goats, toads, or anything else that needs to pick up their pace.

"Go!"

Baby shovelhead shark took off, his fin breaking the surface briefly past the next wave before he disappeared into the Atlantic. After wading back out of the surf I watched the coastline until my husband caught up to me and we both felt sure the shark was safely out to sea.

The remarkable thing about that experience was how unremarkable it was. Sure, that was the first and only time I've carried a shark (of any kind or size) back out to sea, but it wasn't the only interesting thing about that day's walk, or any of the other hundreds of walks I've taken on these northeastern Florida beaches.

Also on that walk, I found the complete sand dollar I mentioned earlier, and had a delightful conversation with a young woman and her preschool daughter about the creature that lived in a whelk shell that they'd found and her mother had to eventually bury back in the sand so her daughter would leave it alone. Routinely we watch dolphins play out past the sand bars and osprey and pelicans hunting along the shore.

We see gulls squabble, at each other and sometimes at us. We've seen manta rays almost close enough to touch. We've had interesting and sometimes outright bizarre conversations with fishermen, walkers, and shark tooth hunters from all over the country and just down the road.

It's not unusual for something unusual to happen on our walks. It's weird if a walk is routine.

I don't know if interesting and offbeat encounters happen to our family because we are creative people, or if we, as writers, poets, dancers, and artists, bring our altered perspective to otherwise mundane situations and make them more than they might be on their own. But I like to think that these experiences are there for all to have, if they make time to fully interact with the world around us.

What I'm sure of, though, is that these experiences are critical for creative people to have if they want to continue building worlds from words, paint, motion, pixels, or clay. Before you can write what you know, you have to know. And more often than not, knowing comes from doing. Living. Experiencing.

Make it an every day thing.