

Black-tipped and Beautiful!

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Few sharks have the sleek lines and beautiful colouration to match those of the blacktip reef shark.

This beautifully streamlined shark can be found in the tropical Indo-West and Central Pacific regions. That is to say, it can be found in the Red Sea, the eastern coastline of Africa, through South-east Asia, to Australia and the central Pacific Ocean nations. This shark even reaches as far north as the southernmost Japanese islands.

It reaches an average size of around 1.4m, though large individuals have been known to get to around 1.8m. They are easily identified by the large black tips to the dorsal and caudal fins, and the smaller black tips which adorn every other fin.

This relatively small shark is a member of the whaler family and has found an interesting niche in which to hunt. As the tide creeps over the reef-top the blacktips move in as well, scurrying around, seemingly unaffected by the swell, poking their snouts into corners and crevasses in an area where their size and manoeuvrability makes them the top of the food chain. Though their diet is heavily weighted towards fish, they are known to feed on a wide variety of creatures, such as crustaceans, cuttlefish, octopus and occasionally an odd item or two. One study in northern Australia showed that many of the sharks caught there had eaten terrestrial snakes. I trust that the snakes there had taken to swimming!! These sharks are also known to come into mangrove areas at high tide, so possibly the snakes were found during these incursions.

In fact, my first sighting of one of these sharks was in an area so shallow that I nearly fell over in surprise when I saw it! I was walking along the waterline on a beach on

the ocean side of Exmouth in WA when a small blacktip about 40cm long swam past me in about 10cm of water. Of course I had the wrong camera in my hand. My subsequent sightings over the years were glimpses from a distance, as these sharks have always been very timid to my experience. It wasn't until I visited Fiji's Shark Reef that I managed to get close to this species and be able to observe more than one individual. Or for that matter, observe them in any other way than a quick glimpse when they saw me and turned tail. Sitting on top of the reef on this world-famous shark site was astounding. In around 1.5-2 m of water these small sharks could be easily observed scouting the top of the reef, poking around and harassing the local fish species as all good sharks should. It was interesting to watch as the small swell went through and had no apparent effect on their swimming motion or on their location on the reef. These fish are really well adapted to what they do. Unfortunately they are becoming rarer over much of their range. They are actually a very good eating fish, and this has hastened their drop in numbers, as they have been targeted by several fisheries. Fortunately they are not fished for commercially in Australian waters. I actually once spotted one in Indonesia, and was told it was a rare sighting there, as it had been heavily overfished. These sharks are targeted not only for their flesh, but are a part of the very lucrative, and often cruel, shark finning industry.



Useful Stuff

Caudal fin: tail
Pectoral fin: main side fin
Dorsal fin: main top fin
Terrestrial: land dwelling