

ACTIVITY: Body surfing

CASE: GSAF 1982.03.10

DATE: Wednesday March 10, 1982

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Atlantic Ocean off a private beach about a half mile south of the inlet at Palm Beach, Palm Beach County, Florida, USA.

26°42'N, 80°02'W

NAME: Matthew McGrath

DESCRIPTION: A 16-year-old male from Palm Beach, he is 5'8" tall and weighs 139 pounds. He was wearing blue swim trunks with a yellow overall pattern.

BOARD: Yellow with pink stripes and black fins.



BACKGROUND

WEATHER: It was a partly cloudy day. There was an east-northeast wind at 16 mph and the air temperature was about 76°F.

MOON PHASE: Full Moon, March 9, 1982

SEA CONDITIONS: The sea temperature was about 77°F, there was moderate chop, the water was clear to murky; the incident occurred in white water surf. High tide was at 08h15, low tide at 14h27.

ENVIRONMENT: The sea bottom consisted of sand with a reef about 200 feet from shore. No fishing activity was observed in the incident area, and no baitfish were seen.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 10 feet

DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE: Four feet

TIME: 14h00

NARRATIVE: Matthew McGrath rode a wave inshore which tipped and he fell into white surf water. As he 'hit bottom' (seabed) he felt the bite, but initially thought he hit a rock. Almost immediately he realized it was a shark on his left elbow. He used his right hand to "hit the shark in the nose" and push it away. He surfaced, got back onto his board and made shore unaided. He states that there was no actual pain at the time or for a while after the bite, but he did experience pressure.

INJURY: The left elbow was bitten. There were multiple lacerations of the left upper extremity and forearm.

FIRST AID: McGrath called his companion and the went to the hospital by private car. A towel was used to control the bleeding and this action appeared moderately successful.

TREATMENT: Robert Rosenberg, M.D. repaired the injury at Good Samaritan Hospital, North Flagler Drive, West Palm Beach.

SHARK SPECIES INVOLVED: McGrath states that he did not actually see the shark at any time, but believes the shark was either a blacktip (*Carcharhinus limbatus*) or spinner (*C.*

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maculipinnis), although he grouped both species as “spinner” and feels that it was in the four to five foot range. Since McGrath did not see the shark, the only assessment as to species identification would be conjecture. The puncture wounds and lacerations suggest involvement by a member of the smaller-toothed *Carcharhinus* group and the only ones with teeth consistent with the punctures are *C. limbatus* and *C. maculipinnis*; other species such as *falciformis*, *obscures*, *milberti*, etc., have teeth which probably would have inflicted greater damage. However, these latter species cannot be definitely eliminated. Further, spinners and blacktip sharks are quite common in the area of the incident having been visually observed by numerous fishermen, Coast Guard pilots and others. It is quite possible that the shark was “startled” when McGrath fell off his board directly in its path and bit in an act of “self defense.” There does not appear to have been any feeding effort and the shark did not follow through with subsequent action.

NOTE: This incident occurred one block north of the one involving Robert Conklin. (GSAF 1981.10.17)

ADDENDUM: (Personal) examination of McGrath’s injuries eight days postoperatively suggests that the shark may have bitten twice rather than once as stated in the body of this report. Numerous irregular puncture wounds in a rough arc-like pattern on the upper arm oppose a long arc-shaped laceration below the elbow gives the impression that the shark had McGrath’s entire left elbow, in a bent position, in its mouth. Additional numerous randomly-patterned puncture wounds in the middle of the left forearm appear too separated from the main injury to be incidental or caused by the shark’s side/back teeth; absence of any laceration in this area tends to rule out that these injuries were caused by McGrath pulling his arm back or out of the shark’s mouth. These mid-forearm puncture wounds appear to have been inflicted by the shark only slightly closing its mouth either before or after inflicting the serious elbow injury; since McGrath stated the elbow injury was the first he felt, I feel that these forearm wounds were inflicted after the elbow bite.

Dr. Rosenberg states that there should be no serious functional impairment; he does not feel that physical therapy will be required; disfigurement will be consistent with scarring due to repair and will be minor.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Morris M. Vorenberg, GSAF