

ACTIVITY: Surfing

CASE: [GSAF 2006.08.29.b](#)

DATE: Tuesday August 29, 2006

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Pacific Ocean at Florence, Lane County, Oregon, USA.

44°N, 124°W

NAME: Tom Larson

DESCRIPTION: He is a male, a 23-year-old welder from Eugene, Oregon. He is 6' tall, weighs 165 lbs, and was wearing a wetsuit, booties and hood, but no gloves.

SURFBOARD: He was using a pale solid yellow 9'2" 1960s-style longboard (log) with red vertical stripes and a single white fin at the back (see photo at right).

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The sky was overcast throughout the day but was clear from about 5 pm to 7 pm. Florence, Oregon recorded clear skies at 6:50 pm, but by 7:30 pm the sky was overcast, there was no wind, and surface visibility was seven miles [11.3 km]. The air temperature was 60.8°F [16°C], dew point 53.6°F [12°C], humidity 77%, and sea level pressure was 30.09 inches [1018.8 hPa].

MOON PHASE: Waxing Crescent, 27% of the Moon was illuminated.

SEA CONDITIONS: The waves were small, but clean with a very long period and, unnaturally for Florence, had perfect shape. The sea was glassy with two- to four-foot swells. There were three- to five-foot mushy peeling rights breaking 100 to 150 yards off shore and 50 feet south of the jetty. The water temperature was in the mid 50s [estimated], and underwater visibility was two to three feet.

ENVIRONMENT: The incident took place over a sandy bottom and there was no deep water channel nearby, however salmon and steelhead are spawning this time of year and swimming from the ocean up rivers, and so both sharks and sea lions often gather at river mouths. When the surfer entered the water, he said there were no sea lions barking, but there were dead birds and fish on shore. From the time that the surfers paddled out until the incident took place they observed two porpoises and two to four seals in the water.

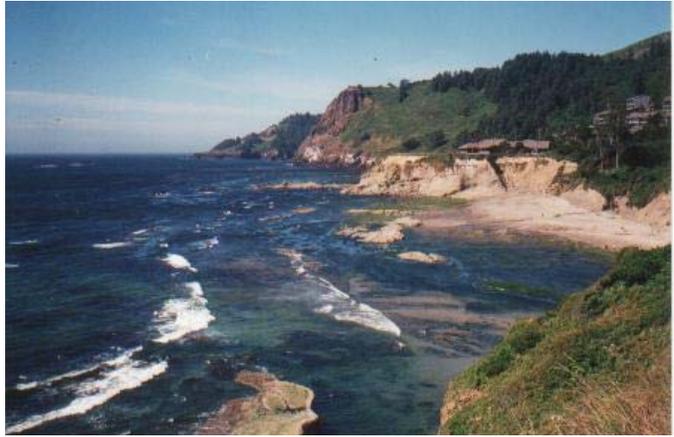
DISTANCE FROM SHORE: Larson thought he was 100 to 150 yards offshore, but Nathan Ruddick estimates he was 60 to 80 feet from shore.

DISTANCE FROM JETTY: 50 feet south of the south jetty

DEPTH OF WATER: Eight to 14 feet

TIME: 18h45 [6:45 pm]. Shortly before sunset (Sunset was at 7:48 pm Pacific Coast Time).

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Florence, Oregon



Tom Larson and his wife, Chelsey Larson, look at his torn wet suit boot.

NARRATIVE: Tom Larson, Sam Larson, Eli Kreigh, Nate Rudick and Keenan Keeley, paddled out to log some time in the uncrowded surf at 16h00. The first sign of a shark in the water came right after the small pack of surfers hit the water when Tom's buddy Keenan thought he saw a dorsal fin. "We were like, 'No, dude, that's a porpoise'," Tom said. "We'd seen some porpoises in the water earlier. It didn't look 'sharky'. No ominous overcast skies, no sea lions barking, just a calm, idyllic day for surfing."

As evening came, the sun dropped low in the sky. Tom angled his longboard out of the water to block the light. Tom and his friends had been in the water for two to two and half hours. Normally, the group would have packed it in by then. But they'd driven from Eugene after work, and the waves were still breaking clean.

Tom was sitting at the back of his board, his feet dangling in the water, when he suddenly felt something grab his right foot. Initially, he thought it was a sea lion that thought his foot as a fish. "At this point the shark hadn't fully bit down, it had just mouthed my foot," he said. "It pulled me off my board until I was floating chest-deep in the water, holding onto my board." He looked down and saw a two-foot fin and the shark circling him. "It clamped down and started shaking my foot," Tom said. Instinct kicked in. He screamed "Shark!" and reached for his board. "My friends were in the water, and I wanted them to get out," he said.

"I heard Tom screaming," said his 21-year-old brother Sam. "I looked and saw him splashing, holding onto his board, half in the water. He had a complete look of terror on his face. All the color had left his face. I guess we were both in shock, because I couldn't see in color. Then at least two feet out of the water, I saw this black dorsal fin swimming around him. The tail lashed out and threw a bunch of spray. That's when it grabbed him again."

"The shark bit down on my foot and tried to dive deeper," said Tom. "It just felt like a vice, a bear trap clamping down. There wasn't any pain – probably because my adrenaline was going. Its tail kicked up a bunch of spray and it began to shake my leg violently. The only thing I could do, I don't even consider it a concise thought more like an instinct, was to stab at the shark with the tail and fin of my board. I landed three solid blows as the shark shook my leg and foot. On the fourth shot I missed and by the fifth time he had let go (the whole thing lasted three to five seconds but it felt like an hour). Then the shark was gone. I jumped back on my board still screaming (I didn't stop until my fin hit the sand) and paddled for shore hoping my friends would do the same. The scariest thing was paddling in," he said.

INJURY: The surfer sustained eight lacerations and puncture wounds to his right foot. No tendons were severed, and his doctor expects him to make a full recovery.

FIRST AID: On shore, Tom surveyed his injuries. The bites had torn the toe off the surf bootie on his right foot, and he'd begun to bleed through his wet suit. He wrapped a shirt around his wounds and limped to the car, shrugging off a Western Lane ambulance called by a passer-by. While Sam and Eli waited on the jetty, Nate and Keenan took Tom to Peace Harbor Hospital in Florence.

TREATMENT: The surfer's injury was repaired with 35 sutures.

SPECIES: According to the surfer, the shark was eight- to ten-feet in length. "I only saw the jagged" dorsal fin of the shark. It was 18" to 24" tall and looked to be black or dark grey," said Tom. Photographs of the wounds indicate a white shark was involved.

SOURCES: Interviews with Tom Larson and witnesses

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Ralph Collier