Wading in the Shadow of the Shark

(Jul. 10, 2006 - Tampa Bay, FL.)... The hairs on the back of my neck alerted me to its sudden appearance as I stood waist deep in swirling clear waters of Tampa Bay, Florida. Only seconds earlier I was cheerfully reeling in my third speckled trout of the morning, lost now to the chill of sheer terror as a large, dark shadow slowly began circling me.

Scary, frightening, and extremely dangerous situations often occur within seconds from out of nowhere. My situation within the shadow of the shark came about while fishing with my brother Pete on Tampa Bay. We had decided to wade-fish the flats, on the east side of the Sky Way Bridge for some speckled trout, where a bright early morning found us trekking about 150 yards out. The tide was low with incoming waters promising good fishing action as we fanned out casting ¾ oz silver Sprite spoons.

Pete chose to cast the grassy pockets on the flats, while I opted for a submerged sandbar near a bay channel about fifty yards away. Rising waters enabled me to wobble my spoon along the drop-off edges of the sand bar where feeding specks could take an interest. And it wasn’t long before I managed to string up two nice keepers. Calling to my brother to come on over to get in on the action, he yelled back that he was already into some good specks with three boxed already. Another cast had me hooked up to my third speck and it looked like our mornings worth of trout fishing was going to provide some exceptional flats action. ... That is, until the shadow appeared!

The hairs on the back of my neck alerted me to its sudden appearance as I stood waist deep in swirling clear waters of an incoming tide. Only seconds earlier I was cheerfully reeling in my third speckled trout, lost now to the chill of sheer terror as a large, dark shadow slowly began now to the chill of sheer terror as a large, dark shadow slowly began circling me. As the shadow circled in closer on its second run I...
realized it was a six foot brute of a Bull Shark, which are very dangerous and known man-
eaters. Not wanting to move for fear of provoking an attack my mind numbing fear soon
turned to survival reactions however when the shark suddenly rushed in on its third pass,
causing me to use my fishing rod as a whip and spear by forcefully thrashing and stabbing
at the toothy critter to ward it off. The shark then veered off, swimming back towards the
channel, disappearing into its ghostly depths.

Not believing my luck, I frantically alerted my brother of the shark and all but walked on
water to close the fifty yard distance between us. But with the shark seemingly gone now
we decided to continue fishing for specks. ......WRONG THING TO DO!!

Unseen by us, the shark had slithered back onto the flats behind us. Then, while we began
wading and casting towards another grassy pocket, something BIG suddenly SLAMMED
into my back, knocking me almost silly and breathless. …The shark was back!!

Spooked and frightened by this sudden attack, Pete reacted first by moving in between me
and the shark to shield me from any further assaults. “They’ll sometimes “bump” their
intended prey before attacking, Pete worriedly advised, which did little to calm my fears. As
the shark turned about twenty yards out in front to begin a wider circle around us we began
back-wading towards the distant shoreline about 150 yards behind us. Keeping our
attention totally focused on the shark, which was now circling us in an agitated, head
shaking manner, we begun wading back to back for dual protection while thrashing the
waters with our fishing rods to keep the shark at bay. Finally, after what seemed like
“forever” we managed to reach knee-deep waters where the shark, now becoming uneasy
in the shallows, bolted back towards the safety of deeper waters.

As scary as it sounds is as scary as it was, but my frightening ordeal could’ve been easily
avoided if I had only used a little common sense with a little more working knowledge about
wade fishing. First of all I was in the sharks’ domain and had unconsciously provided him
with what he was hunting for, FOOD! And “Me” as a main course on its menu was a very
scary thought indeed! But after it was all over I now believe the shark wasn’t really after me
during that first confrontation, but had been attracted to me by the bleeding trout tethered to
my stringer instead. But the rasping bruise on my back caused by the second confrontation,
along with the hostile behavior the shark directed towards us while circling us as we
retreated towards shore, was definitely that of an attacking predator. We did have some
trouble secured in my brothers’ float box, which may have diverted his aggression if we had
tossed them out to thwart its interests in us, but when you’re back-stepping in water busily
fending off persistent and aggressive shark, tunnel vision focuses strictly on surviving the
situation of the moment. Besides, I will never forget the chilling stare of the eye of that shark
as it kept its focus on its prey; .....US!

Mistake #1- I was wade fishing while dressed in shorts and sandals- ALWAYS wear long
pants, sneakers, and a shirt while wading. Flashing bare legs and feet attract attention like
the silver spoon we were using to catch trout. Bare skin areas will attract baitfish such as
piggy perch and pinfish, which are edible delights for hungry predators such as shark.
Covered feet are a must, for that very same reason, but also for protection against cuts and
abrasions from broken seashells and bottom clutter where chafing and bleeding can
become an attractive lure for roving sharks. Sport & tackle shops, such as Academy,
Gander Mountain, or Wal-Mart, sell neoprene type “wade-booties” that are excellent for
wade fishing and are highly recommended for this type of water sport.
Mistake #2- I was using a short, stringer type fish tether, that causes the fish to bleed, emit fishy oils from stress, and regurgitate food from their gullets which acts like a chum-line to attract predators like cats to catnip. The use of Do-Nets (a floating net type fish holder) or float boxes, (tote-along Styrofoam coolers designed for wade-fishing) are best as they will basically keep you, and your catch safe from the scent trails of roving shark. Also be sure to have these devices connected to you with at least 50 foot cords to keep your catch away from your body, attached to quick release clips on your waist for emergency releases. This will allow you to quickly release your fish from your waist in case a shark latches onto your catch. AND BELIEVE ME you DON'T want to be tied to the other end of a cord that's being dragged off by a hungry, marauding shark!

Mistake #3- I was fishing by myself without the protection of the “buddy-system”. Two anglers fishing together can spot possible danger a lot quicker, and when that danger becomes hostile, two people are a much better deterrent when trying to ward off an inquisitive or attacking shark. (I shudder at the thoughts of what could have happened if I had been alone without the help of my brother as it was quite possible that this report would’ve become my obituary instead.) Wade-fishing is still in my blood as I still enjoy the sport, but with advanced wade-fishing knowledge and by taking some common sense precautions with my gear and tack, I feel that it’s safe to do so.

#4- When wade-fishing stay clear of fishing near piers, docks, or boat ramp areas as these areas are known to hold shark fishing tournaments or have fish cleaning stations that draw the attention of predator sharks. Some anglers choose to wear life-vests while wade-fishing, which was good for one angler I witnessed being swept out into the Gulf by a strong outgoing tide, but he was soon rescued to wade-fish another day.

One humorous item that I read in newsprint many years ago provided some insight on the fear of shark attacks while wade-fishing the Texas Gulf coast. The article pointed out that fishermen who spent time in the water often had to relieve themselves every 15 to 20 minutes due to water absorption in their bodies. The outdoor writer then pointed out that human urine streaming into the water actually held the same attraction as human blood being bled into the water for attracting hungry sharks who would then hone in on the scent slick and follow it to its source!!

I mean to tell you, after reading that article and upon visiting a popular Galveston Island wade fishing area, you could really tell who had read the article from those who had not, as every now and then an angler would leave their fishing positions in the line-up of wade anglers catching
surf run specks, move over about 20 yards to relieve themselves, then move back in to
claim their fishing spots. ................And I was one of them!!

In another rather scary, but humorous incident, which occurred at Rollover Pass on Texas’
Bolivar Peninsula, I witnessed a Bull Shark suddenly “pop-up” right in the middle of several
wade-anglers while they were fishing for flounder and specks. The sight of its fin slowly
zigzagging through all of these people was a sight to see, especially with all the yelling and
screaming that was going on with anglers attempting to get out of its way. But the shark
ignored the anglers rigged with do-net and float box systems and headed straight for the
only angler who was using a stringer. Violently shaking its head after latching onto the
stringer the shark then swam off into the channel with a stringer of specks firmly clenched
within its toothy jaws. Luckily, the unlucky angler was using a quick release clip and wisely
let the shark have his stringer. While the other waders were exiting the water, another
angler about 50 yards away suddenly bowed-up to a speckled trout. The sight of an arched
rod bending to the fight of a speck was just too much for some of the exiting anglers who
lost their fear of the shark and quickly reentered the water to start fishing again. When
asked why? One angler just grinned and said, “MAN, the heck with the shark. the trout were
biting!!

This type of fearless bravado was flaunted by a few diehard wade-anglers who brayed
about not having any fear of sharks. That is until one afternoon while they were fishing an
outgoing tide on the Gulf side of Rollover Pass. About six of these “macho-waders” were
lined up casting for specks when suddenly an eight foot Lemon or Bull shark rolled about
ten yards in front of them. It only took about 2.6 seconds for all six of these fearless “macho-
anglers” to become timid shore-bounders!!

In another incident I experienced with being “sharked” was when I was wading for trout off
of Pelican Island, near Sea Wolf Park, on Galveston Bay. A shift work-buddy, who had
never wade-fished before, was with me as we fished around the old concrete ship. I had
managed to put three nice specks on my stringer, which had a fifty foot floating cord. While
wading back to Sea Wolf against an incoming tide a rather large shark suddenly popped up
grabbing my largest speck, about a five pounder, shook its head then quickly disappeared,
leaving only the head still attached to my stringer. I quickly released my stringer so it
wouldn’t follow us in. My new wade-buddy never fished with me again.

Wading within the shadow of shark is unavoidable when entering into their domain, and in
most cases, the fear of sharks is often limited to the clarity of the waters that you are fishing
in. Case in point, the almost crystal clear waters of Tampa Bay provide panoramic “in your
face” views of whatever may be prowling near you, as opposed to the sandy green, and
often hiding waters of Galveston Bay that suppresses any vision of what may be lurking
around you, which may be a blessing to most waders who prefer not knowing what is
swimming amongst them. But believe me, when wade-fishing in the warm coastal waters of
the Gulf, “the sharks are ALWAYS there!

Although my experience on Tampa Bay with an aggressive shark was an extreme incident,
it quickly became one of a fond and lasting memory of my brother Pete, who had moved in
to protect me during a time of intense danger. So I wish to dedicate this article to my hero,
my brother, my fishing buddy, Pete K. Rickman, 1951 - 2006, who taught me all about “A
Bridge over Troubled Waters”......... May he rest in peace.

I will miss him DEARLY!
This 5 ft long, 100 lb Bull Shark was caught and landed in only 4 feet of water by a surf angler fishing a popular wade-fishing area.

All photos in this article are by Ed Snyder