

That Baby Shark Ate My Bird!

By Martin Hagne

Everything in nature is connected in one way or another. When we pull at a string in nature something else moves somewhere (taken from the famous John Muir quote: When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.). Even birds and sharks are tied together.

The Gulf of Mexico is the ninth largest body of water in the world. From its shallow coastlines to the deep ocean waters reaching 14,300 ft, it is very biodiverse, and houses a large number of marine life. That includes at least 1,443 finfish species, 42 ray/skate species and a multitude of others, and about 50 shark species.

Of those 50 shark species, the most commonly found in the Gulf seems to be the Blacknose Shark, Bonnethead Hammerhead Shark, Bull Shark, Finetooth Shark, Florida Smoothhound Shark, Great Hammerhead Shark, Lemon Shark, Nurse Shark, Oceanic Whitetip Shark, Sandbar Shark, Shortfin Mako Shark, Smooth Hammerhead Shark, and Common Thresher Shark.

Its been 46 years since Jaws scared us all out of the water! But Great White Sharks are not that common in the Gulf as the water temperature is a bit too warm for their liking. And it's been studied and found that they don't really care for the taste of humans that much after all! But they do eat birds, at least the occasional gull or pelican that is too slow or found dead!

And so does the Tiger Shark! Tigers are the fourth largest species of shark, and can grow up to 25 feet. They migrate through the Gulf, and apparently, they use different depths of the Gulf depending on their age. Juveniles tend to favor shallower areas and along the ocean shelf. And according to shark researcher Marcus Drymon, a fisheries ecologist at Mississippi State University in Biloxi, the young Tigers seems to be using the shallower areas as nursery grounds. He and his colleagues collected the stomach contents from 105 tiger sharks by dissecting dead sharks and washing out the stomachs of live ones (no sharks were harmed).

From those sharks they found the remains of 11 different bird species: eight songbirds including Barn Swallows, House Wrens, Gray Catbirds, as well as White-winged Doves, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, and others.

How do they get those land birds? Can sharks walk now, or fly? It's all timed with the spring, and especially fall, bird migration. Millions of songbirds, and others, pour over the Gulf to head north in the spring to nest in the US and Canada, and back south in fall to their Latin wintering grounds. Apparently, this coincides with young Tiger Sharks hanging out in the shallower part of the Gulf. Anytime there is a major storm or hard headwinds thousands of migratory birds can't make landfall, falling into the Gulf becoming Tiger snacks. Maybe not a pretty picture, but nature can be brutal at times... and birds are tied to sharks!