

Human-Friendly Sharks

Not all sharks are the brutish, man-eating monsters we've made them out to be. Here are some of the gentler, docile ones that are timid as a mouse!

Text and Photos: Dave Harasti



Horn Sharks



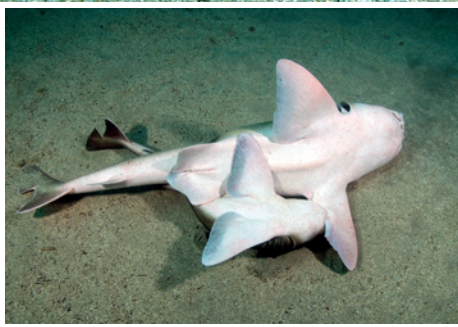
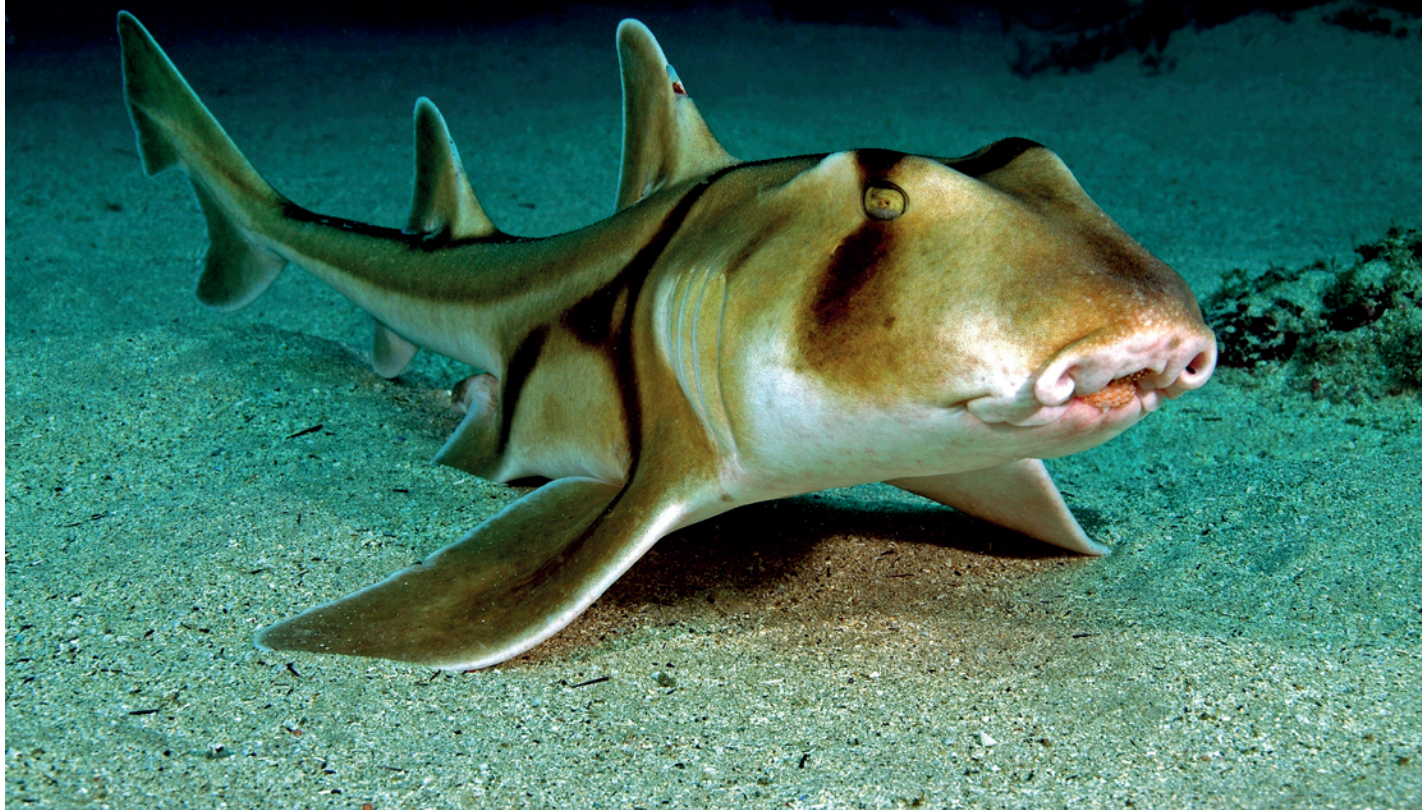
Wobbegongs



Blind Sharks

When the word "SHARK" is mentioned, most people instantly picture a great, big fish with sharp pointy teeth appearing all menacing and ferocious. Probably something very similar to "Bruce", the great white shark, in the movie *Finding Nemo*. When we generally hear about sharks in the news, it's normally about a poor surfer or swimmer and their unfortunate shark encounter. Fortunately, not all sharks are big and scary and there are many species of sharks found throughout the world that are small, meek and considered harmless.

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region there are many sharks that can be deemed a "friendly" species as their size and docile nature make them quite harmless. These types of sharks include the bamboo and epaulette sharks, wobbegongs, horn sharks, blind sharks and the small cat shark species. Australasia is home to lots of friendly, docile, bottom-dwelling shark species. We will meet some of the more commonly seen ones here.



Horn Sharks

The horn shark is an unusual looking shark with eight different species occurring in its family. These sharks are very gentle and have very small grinding teeth that they use to feed on crabs and other crustaceans. Two of the more common species are the crested horn shark (*Heterodontus galeatus*) and the Port Jackson shark (*Heterodontus portusjacksoni*) that can be found in the waters of southern Australia. They look very similar to each other although there is a very easy way to tell the two apart: the Port Jackson has a black "triangle" pattern on the side of its body whilst the crested horn lacks the triangle and instead has large brown-coloured blotches from the head to tail. It is also so named because of the high crests above its eyes.

Over winter, large aggregations of Port Jackson sharks can be found on offshore rocky reefs at various locations along the New South Wales (NSW) coast, such as Jervis Bay and Port Stephens, where they come together to mate. Following mating, the females lay black spiral-shaped eggs that are tucked into reef cracks. The crested horn shark eggs have long tendrils that help attach them to sponges and plants whereas tendrils are lacking in the Port Jackson shark eggs. After a period of eight to 10 months the babies hatch at a size of around 15cm. The opened eggs can float to the surface and are often found washed up on beaches.



Wobbegongs

The wobbegong shark is a very unusual looking shark species that is also commonly referred to as "carpet shark". "Wobbegong" is an Australian aboriginal word meaning "Shaggy Beard", which is a reference to the tassels found around their mouths. They can be found in the Western pacific region and there are at least eight different species.

Australia is home to several different wobbegong species that are found living in coastal estuaries and on rocky and coral reefs. The largest of the wobbegong species is the spotted wobbegong (*Orectolobus maculatus*) that can reach 3.2 metres in length and can be recognised by its greenish-brown colouration with white rings or spots covering the body. The banded wobbegong (*Orectolobus halei*) is another large species with a golden-brown-coloured body with broad dark areas with bluish-grey rings. There is also a wobbegong shark that can be found living on coral reefs in tropical waters known as the tasselled wobbegong (*Eucrossorhinus dasypogon*), very distinct from the other wobbegongs because

of the numerous tassels around its mouth. The smallest of the wobbegong species is the dwarf Ornate wobbegong (*Orectolobus ornatus*) that grows to a maximum size of 1.1 metres and is generally found inshore, living amongst sponge gardens and seagrass.

Wobbegongs are ambush predators that lay in wait for any passing unsuspecting prey. Wobbegongs have needle-like teeth for grasping and holding prey and they feed mainly at night. They have been seen to feed on other shark species, including other wobbegongs as well as cuttlefish, octopuses and other fish species. They like living on rocky reefs and are often seen with just their tail protruding from under a rock. Occasionally they can be seen lying on sand out in the open.

Wobbegongs are a docile shark species and don't go out of their way to bite people. Whilst wobbegongs can be considered "friendly" sharks, they are also known for their agility and speed, and they will bite if provoked and may be very reluctant to let go!



Blind Shark

The blind shark (*Brachaelurus waddi*) is endemic to the waters of Eastern Australia and there are only two species in this family. The blind shark's range is from the waters of southern Queensland to Port Stephens in New South Wales. Juveniles are a dark grey to black colour whereas the adults are a greyish-brown colour. Adults generally have white spots all over the body and grow to a maximum size of 1.2 metres. The blind shark is known to hide in cracks and caves during the day and can be very difficult to

photograph because of the way it hides. It is a nocturnal species and at night they search for prey including anemones, cuttlefish, crabs and shrimp.

The blind shark can be distinguished by its long nasal barbels and its common name is derived from its habit of shutting its eyelids when removed from the water. It has the uncanny ability to survive out of the water for up to 18 hours! It sometimes becomes stranded in tidal pools and waits for the next high tide to escape. AD



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DAVE HARASTI is a marine scientist who works as a Research Scientist for the Port Stephens Great Lake Marine Park. He is also currently working on his PhD on the conservation of seahorses and is examining the role that marine protected areas play in their protection. He has been diving for 12 years and has discovered many new marine species, including 14 new species of nudibranchs.