

Our Ocean Backyard  
Gary Griggs  
Article No. 370  
The Ominous Ocean

Summer has arrived, and on sunny days, well on most summer days, the beaches of Santa Cruz are packed with locals and visitors alike, some more crowded than others. Whether it's just sitting in the sand and soaking up the sun, swimming, surfing, paddling, beach combing, fishing or any of a number of other beach activities, it's why we live here, or why many of us head to the coast somewhere for our vacations.

It's warm and relaxing, even when we are surrounded by dozens or hundreds of others seeking the same simple pleasures. And if it hadn't been for the 1975 thriller movie, *Jaws*, we probably wouldn't have a worry on our minds when we wade out into the water. That film, however, forever changed many of our perspectives on the potential dangers lurking out there in the ocean, despite the astronomically low probability of us ever being bitten into by a shark.

Other than petting a perfectly harmless swell shark at the Seymour Marine Discovery Center, I have to admit that in all of my years in the water, swimming, surfing, and paddling, I have never come face-to-face with a shark; never encountered a shark while in the ocean. If I was really keen on having this experience, however, the odds are reasonably good at this time of year that I could paddle out from New Brighton State Beach or Seacliff and see a juvenile great white. They tend to hang out there in what has now been referred to as Shark Park, although there has never been an incident there and scientific consensus seems to be that these young sharks have found water of a comfortable temperature and an adequate food supply.

Over half a century ago, actually 61 years ago to be exact, I had started my freshman year at UC Santa Barbara. I had been assigned to one of the old Marine Corps barracks that had been repurposed as college dormitories. UCSB had a former life during World War II as a Marine Corps Air Station. My roommate Clark and I had quickly become good friends and were the only two guys in the barracks who surfed. We had both come from the San Fernando Valley in Southern California, and somehow, the questionnaire we were given to help match up roommates based on lifestyle had worked out in our case.

Clark had an old balsawood surfboard that had seen the ravages of time. Because it was so waterlogged from years of being in the water, it was half-submerged when he took it into the water. It was more like a log than the ultralight boards of today, which made paddling into a wave considerably more challenging. At more than 10 feet long, it also weighed a ton, so it was easier to drag than carry.

On a beautiful, warm October afternoon, I returned to my dorm room to find Clark huddled under a blanket, shaking. I found this a bit odd on a warm sunny day, so asked him what was going on. I slowly coaxed the story out of him. He had been out paddling in the kelp beds off Isla Vista, just west of the University campus. Clark was also a Scuba diver so had a keen interest in just about anything moving in the ocean. He was just a few hundred feet offshore that afternoon when he saw a dark shape that he thought was probably a seal or sea lion. Ever curious, he paddled slowly

over to have a closer look. When he was virtually over the shape and looked down, however, what he saw sent him into a mild state of shock.

Instead of a sea lion, he saw a large shark, large like longer than his surfboard. And his board, partly submerged, was just grazing the top of the shark's body. No matter how many years you have spent in the ocean and how macho you may feel, this is not a desirable situation for anyone. And I wouldn't describe Clark as a macho guy.

During World War II, when downed pilots found themselves in shark-infested waters, they were advised to do a relaxed form of breaststroke toward safety so as not to agitate the water and attract attention. My roommate made it to the beach, but from his condition when I saw him that afternoon, I don't think he was calm and relaxed as he paddled to the beach with his old, partially submerged balsawood board.

Clark's experience, as well as several of my own, provided a catalyst for writing a new book that has just come out: "Rogue Waves, Rip Currents and Other Dangers Along the Shoreline and in the Sea". While the beach and ocean is normally a place of peace and pleasure, the 71% of the Earth that is covered with ocean poses a myriad of potential hazards to everyone from the casual beachcomber to blue-water sailors. From rip currents and large waves to sharks and sting rays, the possibilities for some water-borne calamity seem almost endless if you stop and think about it for a minute; but in most cases, a deadly outcome can be avoided, or at least the odds reduced, by having a better understanding of the risks involved.

This new book covers a wide range of potential dangers along the shoreline and offshore, but the intent of the stories is not to scare you from stepping into the sea, but rather to provide a better understanding of what might be of concern and how any risks you may encounter compare to those things in our everyday lives that are far more risky – things like texting on your phone while biking or driving.

I will be giving two talks on the new book in July, one at 7:00 pm on July 13 at Bookshop Santa Cruz, and the other at 1:30 pm on July 17 at the Seymour Marine Discovery Center at the University's Coastal Science Campus. You are all welcome.