

SOUTH CAROLINA'S GREAT WHITE SHARK WHISPERER

by Mandy Matney

South Carolina's Great White Shark Whisperer has been watching Shark Week since its premiere in 1988, when he was in middle school.

But this year, Shark Week was different for Chip Michalove. Hilton Head's famous charter captain made an appearance on two episodes of the wildly popular Discovery Channel series. "Never would've imagined in my life this kid from Kentucky who grew up chasing frogs would be on that show, with Snoo narrating," Michalove says. During his impressive career as a charter captain off the Hilton Head coast, Michalove has caught, tagged, and released over 30 great whites for scientific research. Like clockwork, great white sharks swarm the South Carolina coast from December to March every year. They make their journey from the New England area, where scientists teaming up with Michalove spot the rare creatures in the summertime.

Becoming Hilton Head's great white shark whisperer was no easy task. Michalove studied the creatures for decades and made it his life goal to see one off the Lowcountry coast. For 12 straight winters, Michalove attempted to catch a great white shark off the coast of Hilton Head Island. Before Michalove came around, fishermen really didn't even think about attempting to catch great whites off the coast of South Carolina. For years, he was made fun of by the other local fishermen who said Chip was on a "great white goose chase" trying to catch a creature they weren't sure was out there - until one January day in 2014 when Michalove caught his first great white shark. Then he caught another. And another.

"I'm addicted to it," Michalove says. "You can't match the adrenaline rush of being connected to a 2,000-pound fish." Michalove's great white shark adventures have landed him in the





national spotlight several times, but this year was his first year on Shark Week. He said he's had opportunities to be featured on Shark Week before, but he hesitated in fear that he'd share a secret that might end up hurting the species. "You take a film crew and scientists just one time, and they'll know exactly everything that took me years to figure out in one day," Michalove continues. The Discovery Channel filmed him for the show in

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February and early March - and he wasn't sure what was going to happen. There are no guarantees with catching great white sharks in South Carolina. Michalove says just seeing one in South Carolina is "like finding a needle in a field of haystacks."

"They're just not concentrated to one area like they are in other parts of the world," Michalove says. "They're spread out.

Occasionally, we get lucky and get multiple in one day, like that one day we caught lightning in a bottle and hooked seven, but then we'll go out for a month and not even see one." Michalove is fortunate to catch a lucky break when Shark Week film crews visited Hilton Head this winter. They just happened to be in town the week a 55-foot North Atlantic Right Whale was floating off the coast of South Carolina - a great white feeding fiesta.

Michalove and the crew saw more than 25 great whites while the Discovery Channel was filming on Hilton Head.

Michalove is admittedly obsessed and fascinated by the great white shark. Every time he catches one, he learns more about the creature. "Not only are they massive, but they're incredibly intelligent," he says. "This is the smartest fish in the sea we're talking about. It's a process trying to figure them out." He's estimated there are around 1,000 great whites off the South Carolina coast every winter. Because great whites only are here in the winter time, South Carolina hasn't had any great white shark attacks on record.

A year-round business

While great white sharks are only in South Carolina in the colder months, plenty of other shark species like to spend their summers in the Lowcountry, too. Michalove's charter company Outcast Sport Fishing offers unforgettable shark fishing experiences all year long. If you're wanting to go shark fishing in South Carolina with hopes of reeling in giants, Michalove is your guy to call. "The interest in sharks is at an all-time high, and it's only getting higher," he says. "I always tell people, there's no Grouper Week on the Discovery Channel, and there's good reason for that."

While Michalove's best known for his great white shark encounters, he's caught thousands of other sharks off the Lowcountry coast. Here are a few of his other favorite South Carolina sharks.

Tiger sharks

Tigers are the true locals of South Carolina," Michalove says. "No other big shark is here nine months out of the year." Though he has caught a tiger shark during every month of the year in South Carolina waters, typically these sharks head out to the Gulf Stream from December through February. Tiger sharks have been responsible for a lot of attacks around the world, but they are highly unlikely to attack in South Carolina waters. Tiger sharks are the second largest sharks in the southeast (next only to the great white, of course). They are huge and stick out with their black stripes/spots and large heads. Tiger sharks are between 10 and 14 feet and 850-1,400 pounds. Michalove says tiger sharks love the rivers in South Carolina. He's caught a 1,000-pound tiger shark near the Broad River Bridge in Beaufort, which is about 13 miles from the ocean.

As cool as tiger sharks are, Michalove is worried that there are so few large ones in the Lowcountry. "In the last few years, I've been catching the same few tiger sharks that are over 1,000 pounds again and again," he says. "I worry there are so few of the big ones left anymore."

Hammerhead sharks

People, especially kids, love hammerheads. The flat, hammer-shaped heads and wide-eye sets make these sharks ex-

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cellent hunters with almost 360 views of their prey. But don't worry, these sharks aren't much of a threat to humans. "If my boat sank and I had a dolphin and a hammerhead coming at me, I think I'd be more scared of the dolphin," Michalove says. "Hammerheads are scared of their own shadow." Highly sensitive, hammerhead sharks can pick up electric impulses 100 miles away, which makes them good at hunting fish.

There are several different types of hammerhead sharks in S.C., including bonnethead, scalloped, Carolina, and great hammerhead sharks. Great hammerheads can grow up to 20 feet and weigh 1000 pounds.

Bull sharks

A lot of times when you see a shark attack in Florida or South Carolina, the bull shark is blamed.

They are aggressive in nature with a mean bite, but Michalove believes they've been wrongfully accused of a lot of attacks. Over the years, Michalove has read dozens of shark stories where the bull shark is pinned as the likely culprit, but he says the wounds just don't add up to the size and power of their jaws. Bull sharks can grow up to 8 feet long and average around 200 to 290 pounds, but Michalove has seen them as large as 500 pounds.

"If a bull shark grabs you, you're going to need a skin graft or a prosthetic," Michalove says.

Bull sharks were blamed for a series of attacks off the New

England coast in 1916 that eventually inspired the movie *Jaws*. These sharks can survive in fresh and saltwater, which is why Michalove says they're popular among fishing clients.

Bull sharks are in South Carolina between March and October, but peak season is between July and August, Michalove says.

Black tips

Of all the large sharks swimming off South Carolina's coast, blacktips are the peskiest and most abundant. Michalove says he catches around 200 a year. Blacktips are in South Carolina between April and September. They are typically the smallest of the giants in our waters but by no means small, growing up to 150 pounds and typically around four to five feet long. Some can grow up to eight feet.

Michalove believes these sharks are the most likely culprits for most of South Carolina's shark attacks, based on the size of most wounds. Michalove says they have smaller mouths and frequent shallow waters as they chase schools of fish.

"These are the ones cruising through the surf, the ones the life guards blow the whistle at," Michalove says. "They love the beach and the inlets." But what's cool about them? "When you hook them, they jump out of the water and spin," Michalove says. The blacktip is also incredibly photogenic.

Chip's Instagram account is loaded with happy customers embracing blacktips and other fun sharks. Check it out at [instagram/outcast_sport_fishing](https://www.instagram.com/outcast_sport_fishing). ■