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An in-pup ragged-tooth shark (*Carcharias taurus*) is preparing to birth one-metre-long juvenile sharks after two years' gestation

# THE MOTHER LODGE

PREGNANT RAGGED-TOOTH SHARKS, RETURNING TO AN EXACT GPS POSITION TO BIRTH THEIR YOUNG, ENIGMATICALLY ALLOW DIVERS TO DRIFT METRES FROM THEM, SAFE FROM A SAVAGING. BY ROY WATTS

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MARDI GRAS

**I**n the pristine waters of the Maputaland Marine Reserve, manta rays, whale sharks, whitetip reef sharks, moray eels and the ubiquitous ragged-tooth shark – or ‘raggie’ – head up the cast of a staggering 1 250 species of fish that thrive among the southernmost coral reefs in the warm waters of the Agulhas current.

A broad coastline of golden beaches is sandwiched between the Indian Ocean and a sandy ridge holding back a wide expanse of topographically unique dune forest. The ecological integrity of the area is maintained by its great distance from major cities, difficult deep sand roads leading to the reserve and vigilant control exercised by the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife authority.

The coastline offers some of the best diving in South Africa and the world’s scuberati come from all four corners to explore the wonders of this marine World Heritage site, using Rocktail Beach Camp as their base.

I’ve been a keen diver for many years, but the reason I found myself skimming along in the powerful dive centre boat to a precise GPS position was to witness one of those unexplained oceanic mysteries – the annual summer convergence of pregnant ragged-tooth sharks on the shallows near Island Rock. Here they swim around calmly and aimlessly as they wait for the arrival of their pups. Unlike pregnant women who ‘eat for two’, raggies fast, a fact confirmed by a brown film that accumulates on their teeth. A raggie with

plaque on its teeth from lack of chewing is my kind of shark.

Several years ago I had my first introduction to this phenomenon when I encountered five of these magnificent creatures. They've remained icons of fear and fascination ever since.

My father had a half-brother – Jack van Breda – whose severed body was hauled out of the ocean near Indonesia after a shark attack, long before I was born. It was this piece of often recounted family history that played heavily on my mind as I contemplated plunging into the middle of a ragged-tooth pre-natal class. My confidence was bolstered by their reputation for being benign creatures. I also had great faith in the dive master, Darryl Smith, who had conducted hundreds of these forays into the deep without anyone losing a limb, let alone half a body.

We back-flipped into a cobalt void and descended to a modest 15 metres, straight into an undersea Mardi Gras. Tropical fish of every shape, size and colour drifted by against a psychedelic backdrop of coral formations.



Filly lionfish dressed like flappers from the roaring 1920s hovered around, confident that their deadly spines would ward off enemies, while moray eel peeped from protective gaps in the coral.

Darryl finally called a halt at a rocky ridge. There, drifting serenely in what appeared to be an entirely random pattern, were at least a dozen large ragged-tooth sharks – all with irregular grins and badly in need of a dental hygienist. Flattening myself onto the sea bed, I was amazed at their indifference and how close they came in their purposeless meandering. We lay transfixed as they swam by, one of them skimming past but a metre above my head, giving me a crab's eye view of those terrible teeth.

We watched a parade of aerodynamically perfect shapes, with millions of years of evolution and survival encoded in their genes, glide by. This extraordinary experience brought home how misunderstood these ocean creatures are. Finally, I was able to lay Jack van Breda's ghost to rest. ◆

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RAGGED-TOOTH FACT FILE

**RAGGED-TOOTH SHARKS GROW** up to three metres in length. Also called grey nurse sharks in Australia and sand tiger sharks in America, these creatures are extremely sociable, which is thought to be the reason why they congregate during pregnancy. The Natal Shark

Board advises that even the males have a benign demeanour and diving with ragged-tooth sharks under the guidance of experts has become a popular pastime in KZN waters.

**THE SPECIES FACE EXTINCTION BUT** scientists plan to save them through artificial insemination.



[Top] The beach camp at Rocktail near the northern border of KwaZulu-Natal [Left, clockwise from top left] Tropical paradise: A juvenile emperor angelfish (*Pomacanthus imperator*); a long-nose hawkfish (*Oxyrrhites typus*); and a school of blue-stripe snappers (*Lutjanus kasmira*) cavort in the reef [Above] A surprised honeycomb moray eel (*Gymnothorax favagineus*)

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROY WATTS; DR KAREN DELER

:: For more information on Rocktail Beach Camp and Dive, visit [www.wilderness-safaris.com](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com)