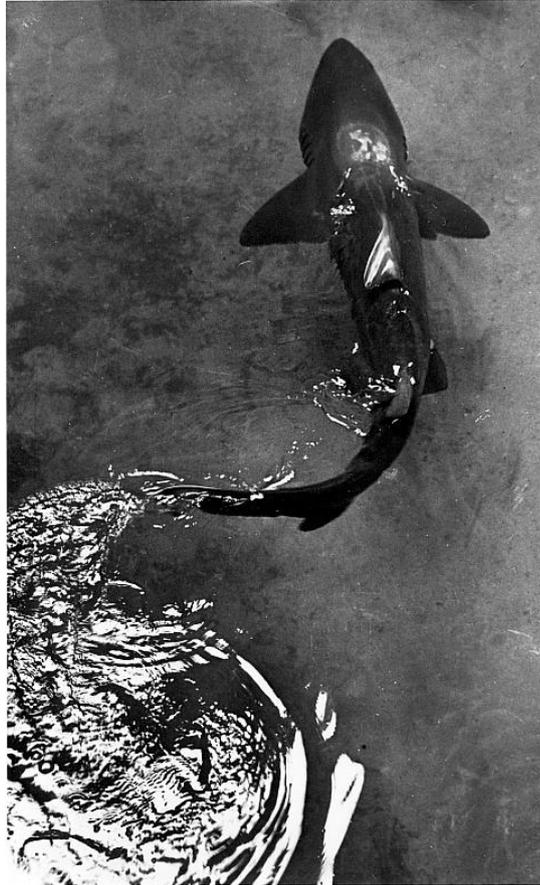


Shark! Shark!



Shark, North Bondi. 1940.

Sharks occur in all the coastal waters and estuarine habitats of Australia and are a natural, and important, part of the aquatic ecosystem. Although Australia continues to have a reputation of being a place where shark attack is not uncommon, in fact the number of shark attacks on swimmers, relative to the number of swimmers in the water, is extremely low. Statistics on shark attacks do not support the belief that Australians are generally in danger when they enter Australian waters.

In the last 50 years, there have been only 56 human fatalities in Australia from shark attack, with the average around one per year. Yet around the country hundreds of thousands of swimmers enter the water every year without coming into any contact with a shark.

Complete details of shark attacks in Australia, including those which have taken place at beaches in the Waverley Local Government Area can be found in the Australian Shark Attack File coordinated at Taronga Park Zoo. This is associated with the International Shark Attack File, which is coordinated by the American Elasmobranch Society.

Shark attacks: Bondi

There have been 13 reported shark contact incidents at Bondi Beach since records began, one of which is known to have been a hoax. Of these incidents only two fatalities have occurred, a very low number given the large number of swimmers who regularly use Bondi Beach. However these two fatalities had a very high media profile, as they occurred within a month of each other in 1929 on Sydney's most popular beach. This fed the erroneous belief that a serious shark 'menace' existed at Bondi Beach.

On 12 January 1929 Colin James Stewart, aged 14, was body surfing when he was attacked by a shark which bit his right thigh and hip, and he later died of his injuries. The fact that he was in only waist-deep water, on a sandbar not far from the beach, only added to the public's fear of sharks.

A year earlier a Bondi life saver, Max Steele, aged 19, was badly mauled by a shark, and lost a leg, but survived. He fought the shark, punching it until it released him and he swam back to the shore where he collapsed.

On 8 February 1929 John Gibson, aged 39, was swimming when he was bitten on the right thigh and his femoral artery severed by a shark and he died.

In its 1934-1935 report the Shark Menace Advisory Committee, convened by the NSW Government, urged the systematic and continuous meshing for sharks along the metropolitan coastline from Broken Bay to Port Hacking. There was little immediate action following the report, but in October 1937 Waverley's first shark nets went up at Bondi Beach.

In 1951 Harry Sheen, aged 14, had his leg bitten by a shark at Bondi, but the outcome of other shark contact incidents has been no injuries, or minor injuries. Whether this was the result of shark netting is debatable and controversial. Many scientists believe declining shark numbers are a direct result of ocean pollution and declining fish stocks, not shark netting. Likewise, reports of increasing shark numbers off our beaches, (and this in itself is controversial – have shark numbers increased, or just recovered?) is believed to be a result of the success of the deep ocean outfall system for sewerage. A cleaner ocean means more fish, more fish means more sharks.

The last shark serious attack at Bondi occurred on 12 February 2009 when Glen Orgias was severely injured while surfing. By eerie co-incidence this was almost 90 years to the day since the last fatal shark attack.

Shark attacks: Bronte

In the twilight hours of Wednesday, 13 February, 1924 Eva (known as 'Nita') Derrett, a 30 year old saleswoman and keen swimmer from Hurlstone Park was badly injured during a shark attack at Bronte Beach. The late afternoon and early evening are the most dangerous periods for shark attack.

Bronte lifesavers, Eric Bennett and Jas Brown, together with Constable C.E. Rushbrooke, went to her rescue and the three of them brought her onto the beach. Her left leg had been taken off from below the knee and her right foot was torn away from the ankle, hanging only by a thread.

Nita Derrett lived, but had both legs amputated. After the shark attack she was fitted with two heavy wooden artificial legs, held in place by large leather straps around her body. She loved the ocean and continued to swim, the salt water easing the skin irritation caused by the leather straps. Her sister Edith would take her to the beach, remove her prostheses and she would wriggle herself into the water. Nita Derrett (now deceased) is remembered by her family for her beautiful singing voice and her courage in the face of a terrible accident.

There were two other minor shark incidents at Bronte Beach in 2001 and 2005.

Shark attacks: Tamarama

No shark attacks have been recorded at Tamarama beach, but in 2000 two men on boogie boards reported being thrown from their boards by a shark.

What's your risk of shark attack? You are...

- 33,000 times more likely to die in a road accident
- 3,000 times more likely to die from skin cancer
- 300 times more likely to drown

...than be killed by a shark.