

Big Mo and the Bruisers

All-out combat with sharks off the Florida Keys.

By RANDY RODE

There may be some places around the globe where bigger sharks are found on a more regular basis, but for sheer variety there is no place like the Florida Keys.

Best of all, the clear waters off the southern tip of the Florida peninsula present opportunities for sight-fishing for big sharks, in deep or shallow water. Here it's possible to chum or tease up a 400-pound bull shark in three feet of water and watch him take a lure, just a few feet behind the boat.

Let's start by looking at the shallow waters of Florida Bay, on the north side of the Middle and Lower Keys. An abundance of bait, productive seagrass and a preponderance of deep channels between shallow banks add up to an ideal setting for light-tackle shark fishing.

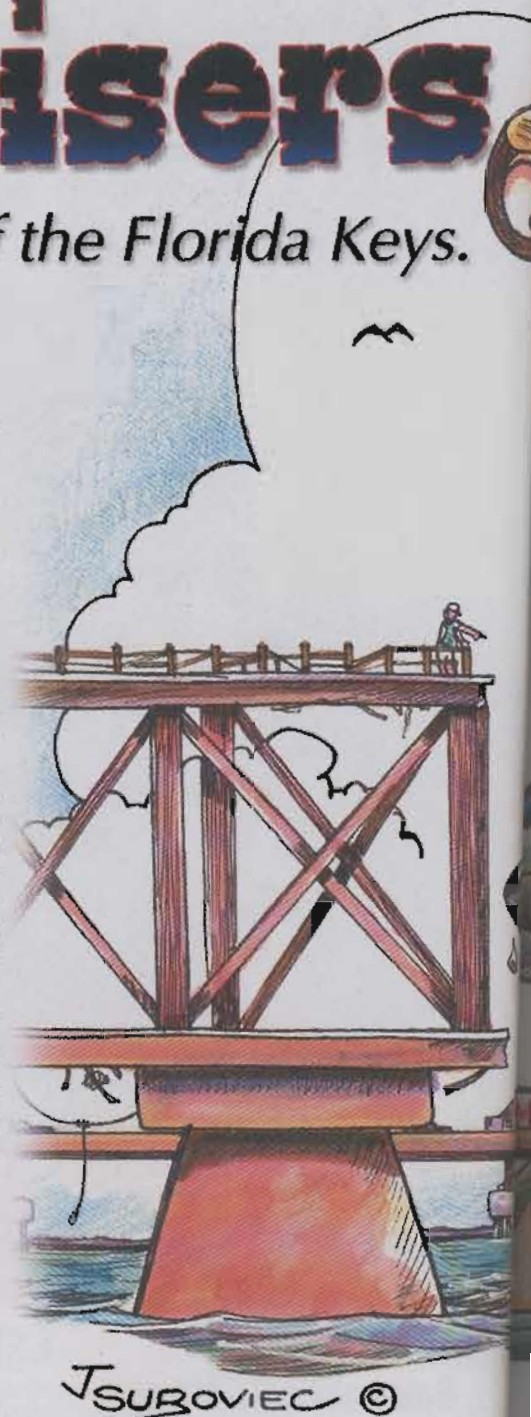
An exciting method for catching big bull sharks, lemons, blacktips and others is to present a live bait beneath a fishing kite. Good baits include legal-size mangrove snapper, blue runners or even a Spanish mackerel. If the conditions are right, it won't take long before you see a big shark, literally throwing a wake, coming toward your kite bait, and ready to do business. After he takes the bait, just reel up the slack as fast as you can, because the amount of slack inherent in kite fishing provides a more than ample dropback. Make sure you have a release buoy attached to your anchor line, because as soon as you come tight on the fish, the chase is on!

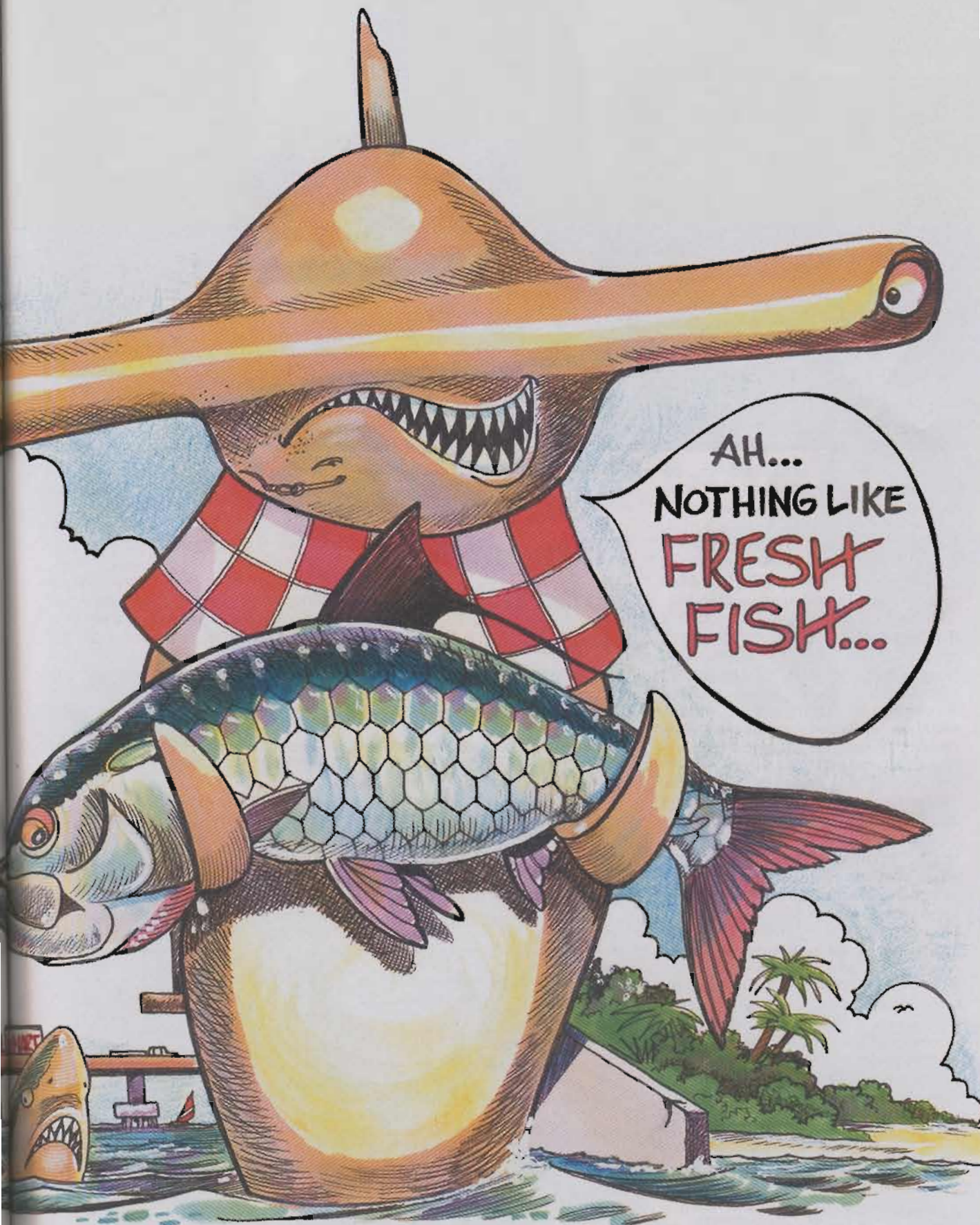
In Florida Bay or anywhere, for that matter, anglers should handle big sharks with extreme caution near the boat. They have a bad habit of spinning up in the leader. I recommend a 6-foot wire

leader, a heavy-duty snap swivel, and then a piece of 200- to 400-pound-test monofilament attached to a double line. There is no reason to have the wire and mono leader any longer than the longest size of the shark that you expect to catch. Long leaders are hard to deal with alongside the boat, but if you must use them, have someone back up the leader man with a spare pair of wire cutters, just in case you take a bad wrap and can't free yourself.

The Middle Florida Keys bridges, most notably the Long Key Bridge, the Seven Mile Bridge, and the Bahia Honda Channel Bridge, are heavily visited by a great variety of large sharks. During the early and prime tarpon season of March, April and May, it is not uncommon to see packs of three to five bull sharks attack a hooked tarpon, or to see a 600-pound hammerhead shark play with a 100-pound tarpon, like a cat playing with a half-dead mouse. The big shark will "scoop up" the helpless tarpon, which may already have a piece taken out of the belly, or may be missing the tail, and swim around with his prey, toying with him. I have seen big hammerheads actually throw a disabled tarpon up in the air, before taking him down, and making a meal of what is left, leaving only a few bubbles,

blood and silver scales glittering in the sunlight as they fall to the bottom like leaves from a tree. When the big predators get really fired up, they will sometimes chase the tarpon under the boat,





coming out the other side with bottom paint on their backs and dorsal fins. Now that's what I call close!

The most famous of all the big hammerhead sharks in the Florida Keys is known as "Big Mo," short for Big Mother. This huge, great hammerhead shark has been realistically estimated at well

over 1,000 pounds. With an overall length of approximately 18 feet, an eye-to-eye measurement across the head of six feet or more, and a 30-inch-high dorsal fin, this shark leaves a big hole in the water when he swims by. This particular shark has a portion of his dorsal fin missing, and prop scars on his back,

making him easy to identify, as he returned to Bahia Honda Channel year after year, following the tarpon migration, preying on hooked fish.

We once hooked Big Mo and fought him for 4½ hours on 200-pound Dacron line on a short, stout, standup tuna stick. My rig was definitely designed to stand



Among guides in the Florida Keys, this is an all-too familiar scene: A huge hammerhead relentlessly pursuing a tarpon.

up to the stress of a prolonged fight, using massive amounts of drag, at times up to 50 pounds or more. We used a 15-pound live jack crevalle for bait, a triple strength 12/0 forged eye hook, coupled to doubled number 19 leader wire, and backed up with a shot of 400-pound-test monofilament, and a short double line. After a nearly 5-hour fight, we subdued the monster, and lea dered him alongside the boat to photograph, measure and release him. It was a bit risky to get the girth measurement, but I have measured several grander marlin, and Big Mo was definitely of grander proportions. My most memorable impression of the creature was his eyes, the size of baseballs, and moving independently, wildly, from side to side, as he temporarily accepted defeat alongside the boat, only to swim off with awesome power after the leader was cut as close to his massive mouth as safely possible.

Some of the most exciting shark fishing of all occurs in blue water off the Florida Keys, mainly over and around underwater seamounts, such as the Islamorada Hump and the Marathon West Hump. These underwater mountains, reaching as close as 360 feet from the surface, are the perfect oceanic environment for big pelagic sharks, such as makos, great whites and occasionally thresher sharks. The humps disrupt the flow of bottom and surface currents, creating upwellings, current rips and temperature breaks that hold baitfish—as well as amberjacks, tunas and other substantial middle links on the food chain. The largest documented catch of a great white shark on rod and reel that I know of, in the Florida Keys, was an 1,100-pounder caught on May 27, 1992, by Wayne O'Dell, aboard the *Jeni-Lyn*, with Capt. Bob Taute and mate Mike Rodimer. The species is now fully protected.

The most successful technique used for raising big sharks on the Keys humps is to drop a live bonito or tuna, then

Some of the most exciting shark fishing occurs in blue water.

hook up an amberjack, and hope that a mako or great white shark rises to the hooked AJ. Sometimes the shark hooks himself while eating the AJ, but most often he is baited on the surface with a second heavy outfit standing ready. A most interesting fact is that, in the majority of cases, the shark will refuse a slab of another amberjack, and can only be baited up on a piece of the AJ he

Shark Regulations

If you plan to keep one or more sharks for the table, read the following very carefully. Regulations differ for state and federal waters, and correct identification of shark species is vital, as there are several species for which retention is prohibited. A basic Florida saltwater fishing license is required of most anglers, with a few exceptions—such as residents fishing from shore.

Florida state waters (*within 3 nautical miles of shore on the Atlantic coast; 9 miles on the Gulf Coast*):

Bag limit: 1 per person or 2 per boat, whichever is less.

Minimum size: None.

Federal waters (*Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean, beyond state water boundary indicated above*):

Bag limit: 1 per vessel per trip; plus 1 Atlantic sharpnose shark per person, and 1 bonnethead shark per person.

Minimum size: 54 inches (no min. for Atlantic sharpnose or bonnethead).

Prohibited species (*state and federal waters*): Sawfish, Atlantic angel shark, bigeye sixgill shark, bigeye thresher shark, bignose shark, Caribbean reef shark, dusky, Galapagos shark, longfin mako shark (much less common than the shortfin), narrowtooth shark, night shark,

sevengill shark, sixgill shark, smalltail shark, basking shark, whale shark, white shark, sand tiger shark, bigeye sand tiger shark.

Here's the tricky part:

For shark catches made in federal waters, a Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Angling vessel permit is required to land sharks (as well as swordfish, marlin, sailfish and most tunas). Additionally, holders of the HMS permit must comply with federal regulations, even while on state waters. Among other wrinkles, this means that if you are in simultaneous possession of a blacktip shark smaller than 54 inches, for instance, and an HMS permit—you could be charged with an under-size fish violation, despite the fact that Florida has no minimum size for sharks. On the flipside, if you return to port in possession of sharpnose or bonnethead sharks above the Florida shark bag limit, and cannot furnish an HMS permit, you could be charged with failure to possess the correct permit. Moreover, if you are stopped while actively fishing in state waters, and in possession of sharks over the state bag limit, an officer could make a case for a violation, regardless of whether you have the HMS permit. To purchase an HMS permit, visit www.nmfspermits.com or call (888) 872-8862.

The shark becomes incensed, and may attack the boat.

has already bitten, which necessitates pulling the partially eaten amberjack out of the water, cutting a slab off that same fish, and presenting it to the shark. During this process the shark becomes incensed, and may attack the boat, looking for his prey. When the bait is finally re-presented to the shark, he will take

the bait with ultimate aggression, and when the hook is set, he will react with extreme violence.

Of all the pelagic fish I have caught, nothing compares to the sight of a 500-pound mako shark taking the bait, alongside the boat, in crystal clear blue water, and then swimming off. Take care not to over-drop, as often the shark will swim in a circle and cut the line with its teeth. The rule of thumb is, the more aggressive the bite, the shorter the drop-back. When this ultimate predator realizes he is hooked, the results are dramatic. Mako sharks have an electric blue color much like billfish, and actually "light up" when their feeding mechanism is triggered. I like to compare a

mako to a blue marlin, but with a bad attitude and a cruel set of teeth. There is something about those re-curved, snaggly teeth and that electric blue-silver-white color that makes the heart beat faster.

Makos fight like no other gamefish, jumping, spinning and storming the boat. I have had anglers hook up makos, and then have them tell me, "He's off!" I always respond with the classic captain's answer of "Reel, reel, reel! He's never off, until you see the

Big T-head closes in for the kill. Below left, spinner shark launches through a bait pod.

Photo by Chris Wilson

Eating Sharks

If you go shark fishing with the idea of keeping one for eating, be prepared. Sharks excrete an ammonia-like compound, and if the fish is not properly cared for, this compound can taint the meat. I normally won't take anything over 50 pounds, with the exception of makos or threshers, both excellent tablefare. My favorite inshore sharks are blacktips and lemons. To properly process a shark for the table, first subdue the creature, preferably with a tail rope, remembering a shark doesn't possess a rigid skeletal structure, and can twist around and bite you at any time. After bringing the shark under control (bending him in an arc works well, while holding onto the head and the tail), bleed him by cutting the throat latch and then remove the entrails. The next step is to scrub the inner body cavity and the outer skin of the shark, using a stiff brush and salt water. The last, and most important step, is to pack the fish in ice. Once back at the dock, steak out the log into 1-inch-thick steaks, and use your favorite marinade and cooking technique. My favorite is to use an Italian salad dressing marinade, and then cook the steaks on the grill. As with cooking all fish, don't overcook your prize; it will continue to cook for a short while after being removed from the grill.

—R.R.

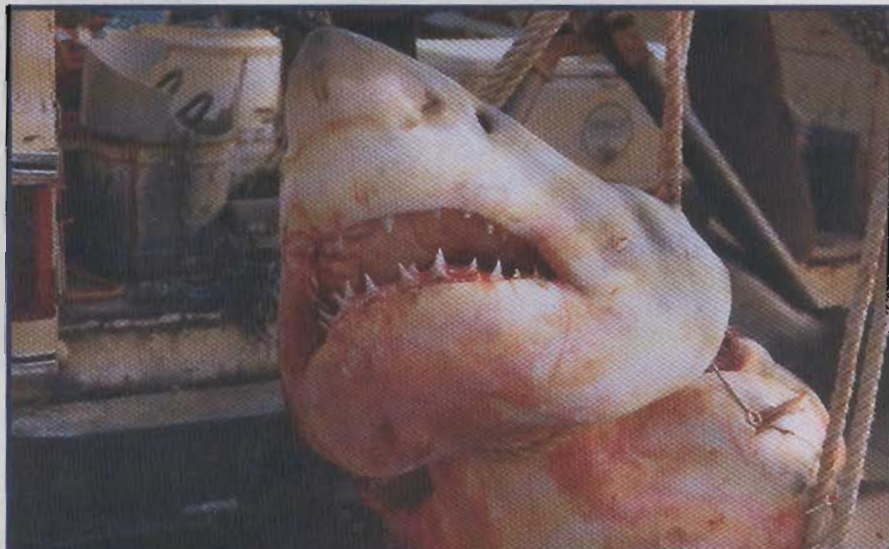
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KEYS SHARKS continued



There are great whites in Florida waters—and springtime along the Keys is when they are occasionally caught. This one, landed on the *Jeni Lyn* in 1992, weighed 1,100 pounds. The species is now fully protected.

bare hook or the fish!" After minutes of furious reeling, the fish may re-appear off the bow, jumping, spinning, and then sounding, only to reappear again, charging the boat.

When fishing in blue water for pelagic sharks, you never know what you'll come up with. One time fishing with the late Don Mann—a longtime *Florida Sportsman* contributor—after a drop, he

came up with two huge, 100-pound-plus amberjacks, one on each hook of a double-hooked, butterflied blackfin tuna, both on the same line. Several months later, we caught a 235-pound big-eyed thresher shark on the Marathon West Hump, along with five silky sharks in the 200- to 300-pound class, just enough to win the Islamorada Shark Tournament.

Conserving Sharks

Sleek survivors for 450 million years, sharks predate man by many millennia. These are primitive predators, successful because of remarkable sensory capabilities. They reproduce slowly and consequently are in danger of being over-fished. The shark population worldwide has dwindled to perilously low levels. In Florida, sharks have received some protection in recent years, including a prohibition on the wasteful commercial practice of finning and discarding the remainder of the shark. (There's still room for improvement on the commercial side.) Inshore netting restrictions have helped, as have tighter recreational bag limits.

Over the years, recreational anglers have for the most part become strong advocates of shark conservation. Today the thrill is in the chase of these powerful, hard-fighting gamefish, no longer in the dockside display of a "trophy." The vast majority of recreational shark catches are released alive.

—R.R.