



A SPECIAL DAY @ FISH ROCK



Grey nurse sharks patrol the shallow gutter, occasionally cruising in close to the camera with a toothy smile.

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> LOCATED OFF THE NEW SOUTH WALES MID-NORTH COAST IS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST FAMOUS DIVE SITES – A SMALL ROCKY OUTCROP WITH AN AMAZING CAVE THAT CUTS RIGHT THROUGH IT SWARMING WITH MARINE LIFE. DIVERS FLOCK HERE TO EXPLORE THE CAVE AND ENCOUNTER A WIDE RANGE OF MARINE LIFE, ESPECIALLY GREY NURSE SHARKS.

Carcharias taurus are a wonderful shark to dive with. Those sharp dagger-like teeth look mean, but are designed to grip fish, not cut flesh, so they pose no threat to divers. Humans are a far greater threat to them – the species is close to extinction in Australia.

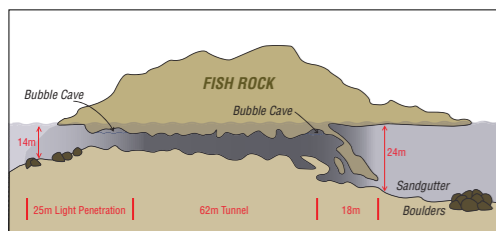
I've dived Fish Rock many times over the past 25 years and encountered an amazing assortment of marine creatures, but never had much luck with the resident grey nurse sharks. They're found around Fish Rock all year, with numbers peaking from April to November. I'd visited at least a dozen times over 10 years before I even saw my first grey nurse here. Even at peak times the sharks disappeared just before I arrived! When I finally saw some, the visibility was terrible. Other divers kept reporting dozens of grey nurse in crystal clear water, but I began to doubt I'd ever have a great grey nurse shark experience here!

Last December my wife Helen and I stopped in at South West Rocks en route to Sydney. We booked two days' diving with Fish Rock Dive Centre, but didn't expect to see many, if any, grey nurse sharks this late in the season. I expected dive centre owner Jon Cragg to tell us the visibility was terrible and no sharks were about. Instead the visibility was nice and there were plenty of grey nurse sharks.

The next day found us on the dive boat and tied to the mooring at Fish Rock. The weather was perfect – flat seas, no wind and surprisingly no current, Fish Rock is nearly always washed by strong currents, one of the reasons it's so rich with marine life. We jumped into 15m visibility, following our guide Larry towards the deep gutter and the entrance of Fish Rock Cave. Once in the gutter we were greeted by a large grey nurse shark. We dropped to the bottom at 24m – I counted a dozen cruising grey nurse – my luck had finally changed! After photographing the sharks swimming above us for several minutes we followed Larry into the cave. Torches on, we parted a thick curtain of bullseyes at the entrance. Only a few feet in we met one of the cave watchdogs, a rather large banded wobbegong shark lazing on the cave floor. Wobbegongs look harmless, but will bite if harassed or accidentally stepped on, so it's always best to give them a wide berth. We slipped over this wobby and moved on to The Chimney, a passage rising vertically into the upper cave.

The life in the Cave is always astonishing; our torches lit up crayfish, shrimps, squirrelfish, glasseyes, featherstars, sea cucumbers, moray eels and several ornate and spotted wobbegong sharks. Normally I'd take more time exploring the darker cave recesses, but today I knew something special waited at the shallow

Below: A lone grey nurse shark silhouetted in the shallow end of Fish Rock Cave.
 Right: A thick school of bronze bullseyes almost obscures the shallow end of the cave; One of the watchdogs of Fish Rock Cave, a large banded wobbegong shark; A resident green moray eel.



cave entrance. I could soon see the dim light ahead, almost completely blocked by schools of bullseyes. We paused to photograph the large resident black cod, but soon forgot it, as a dozen cruising grey nurse sharks were silhouetted amongst the fish at the cave mouth.

I'd never seen grey nurse in the cave before so I was going to make the most of it! I carefully settled down on the boulders between two large banded wobbegongs, and for the next 20 minutes watched and photographed these incredible sharks as they slowly patrolled up and down the gutter, into the cave and amongst the fish. By lying still on the bottom, the sharks seemed to be unconcerned by us, maintaining normal swim patterns, which included swimming only inches above my head. There were both male and female sharks

ranging from 1.5m to 2.5m in length. Several of them had mating bites along their flanks. I took image after image from every possible angle.

Another group of divers was coming up behind us so we left the cave and made our way along the side of the gutter, avoiding the minefield of wobbies. Helen and I sat in the gutter for another five minutes watching the sharks, some of which were playing chicken by swimming straight at our heads, forcing us to duck. With plenty of images and air running low we reluctantly returned to the boat.

After a surface interval, Larry moved the boat to the northern end of Fish Rock. With no current we could dive another special site – The Pinnacle. The top of it was visible from the surface, we couldn't wait to get in. The Pinnacle rises from

Right: A group of grey nurse sharks at The Pinnacle; Herbert, the resident hawksbill turtle, searching for a meal in the cave; A giant cuttlefish shelters under a ledge.



30m to 9m, but we stayed above 21m where the clear water was and all the action. Swimming north we encountered several blue gropers and more wobbies before we reached wall-to-wall sharks. Patrolling the western side of The Pinnacle was at least 20 grey nurse, including some very large females 3m long.

After watching this impressive collection we drifted along the wall to the ridge linking The Pinnacle with Fish Rock, where another dozen grey nurse were swimming. The visibility on this ridge was clearer at 20m and alive with fish and sharks. A school of stripeys hovered mid-water and sweeping around them were bullseyes and yellowtail. Above were

schools of batfish and fusiliers, and swimming between them all were the grey nurse sharks.

I could have stayed all day watching these sharks patrolling the gutter, swimming amongst the fish and cruising by my smiling face, but my air was getting low. I finished off by exploring the gutters that riddle the top of The Pinnacle, finding several large banded and spotted wobbegongs and then swam with a school of batfish under the boat. This was the best day of diving I'd ever had at Fish Rock; calm, clear, no current and wall-to-wall sharks.

The following day was almost as good,



FABULOUS FISH ROCK CAVE

Rated in the top 10 dive sites in Australia, this is a must-do dive. Fish Rock lies off the town of South West Rocks, about a six-hour drive north of Sydney. The cave is 120m long and cuts from one side of Fish Rock to the other. The cave is best explored from the deep entrance at 24m, exiting at the shallow entrance at 10m.

The marine life in the cave can be amazing; beside grey nurse, watch out for stingrays, moray eels, wobbegongs, gropers, crayfish and there is even a resident hawksbill turtle. Many invertebrate species shelter in the cave and the walls of the cave are coloured by sponges, tubastra corals and gorgonians. Visibility inside is usually around 15m, even if the water outside is murky. The cave is safe to dive without guidelines, there is no silt to stir up, but a guide is recommended for a first visit and for inexperienced divers. This is a fantastic dive you'll want to do again and again.

OTHER DIVE SITES

Divers can also enjoy the coral gardens at Black Rock where you'll see stingrays,

gropers, giant cuttlefish, moray eels and a range of reef fish. Green Island also offers great diving with many gutters and ledges to explore. Grey nurse sharks are seen here, but divers will also encounter turtles, stingrays, wobbegongs, blind sharks, gropers, eagle rays, reef and pelagic fish. One of the highlights of Green Island is the invertebrate species; sea stars, nudibranchs, octopus, cuttlefish, shrimps, crabs and even blue ringed octopus can be found here.

DIVE OPERATORS

- Fish Rock Dive Centre – www.fishrock.com.au
- South West Rocks Dive Centre – www.southwestrocksdive.com.au



A grey nurse in Fish Rock Cave surrounded by schools of bullseyes.



A highly venomous blue ringed octopus at Fish Rock.

but the wind and current were back. After four brilliant dives at Fish Rock we were reluctant to pack up gear and hit the road. It had been a fabulous two days, and I was leaving with some of the best memories and images of grey nurse sharks I've had in over 25 years of diving with these impressive sharks.

GREY NURSE SHARKS UNDER THREAT

The grey nurse shark is critically endangered in Australian waters. Protected in New South Wales since 1984, grey nurse numbers continue to decline from fishing pressures, with diver surveys indicating only 500 may remain on the east coast. Several of the sharks at Fish Rock sported fishhooks from their jaws. But external hooks are of minor concern; it is the internal hooks stuck in their stomachs that are killing them. Even though Fish Rock is 'protected' as a grey nurse habitat, the New South Wales Fisheries in all their wisdom still allow fishing – the main threat to the shark's



survival. While I was diving with the grey nurse there were a dozen boats above, still legally fishing at Fish Rock, as long as they didn't anchor! Diving regulations are in place to prevent divers needlessly harassing the sharks; pity the same thing cannot be done for the fishermen.

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