

# Common Sharks of Florida<sup>1</sup>

Florida Sea Grant<sup>2</sup>

Florida's shark population is diverse and includes species that range in size from only a few feet to more than 40 feet in total length. Experts caution sea-goers to beware of sharks 6 feet or longer due to the damage they can cause in a single bite. Among the species that grow to this size and have been known to attack humans are bull sharks, tiger sharks and great white sharks. Whites are seasonal visitors to Florida waters, and bulls and tigers are year-round residents, along with these other common species.

## Blacknose Shark

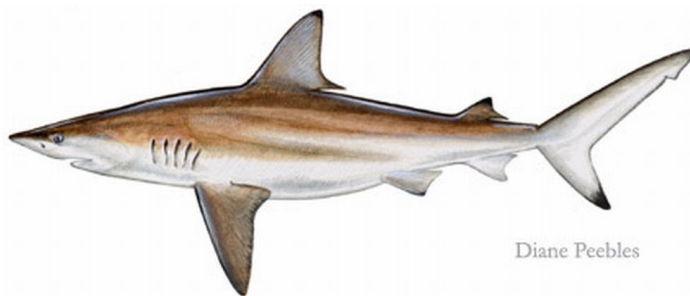
The blacknose shark (*Carcharhinus acronotus*) is a small shark commonly found in Florida bays and lagoons over sandy, shell, and coral bottoms. It has a very noticeable dusky smudge or "moustache" on the tip of its snout, which is more prominent when the shark is young. The blacknose feeds on small fishes but is often preyed upon by larger sharks. Its color ranges from a pale olive-gray above to whitish below. Its maximum length is about 5 feet. While commercially valuable, they pose little threat to humans.



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## Blacktip Shark

The blacktip shark (*Carcharhinus limbatus*) bears a distinctive black tip on most fins except its anal fin. Blacktips are principally pelagic but often come inshore in large schools to feed on schooling fish. Frequently the blacktip shark is the most common large shark in clear-water cuts and along beaches in Florida and the Bahamas. The blacktip is a valuable commercial species with marketable flesh, hide, fins, and liver. It is one of the most commonly collected sharks in the commercial fishery but is also fished for sport on light tackle and is frequently caught by recreational anglers fishing on the beach. Blacktip sharks are responsible for most of the attacks that occur in Florida waters, often striking surfers.



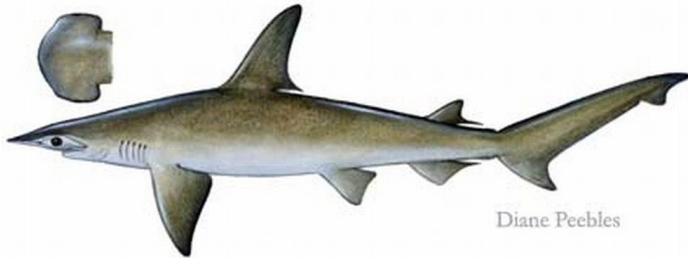
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## Bonnethead Shark

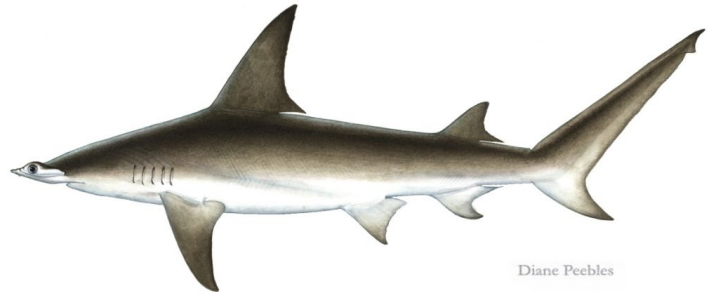
The bonnethead shark (*Sphyrna tiburo*) is the smallest of the hammerhead family, commonly 3 to 4 feet long. This species must swim continuously so that its gills receive oxygen from the water, otherwise it will sink. It is abundant

1. Compiled from: SGEF-25, A Tackle Box Guide to Common Saltwater Fishes of Southwest Florida; Florida Museum of Natural History; NOAA Fisheries; Florida Marine Research Institute; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Illustrations courtesy of Diane Peebles and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Dawn Witherington and Vetrol Data Systems, Inc. Published June 2002. Revised September 2013.
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in nearshore Florida waters and popular in aquariums. Gray or grayish-brown in color, the bonnethead has a broadly widened head in the shape of a shovel. It feeds chiefly on crabs and other crustaceans. It is a good sportfish and is commonly caught by recreational anglers. Commercially, its value is limited; it is used mostly as crab bait. This rather shy species is considered harmless to humans.

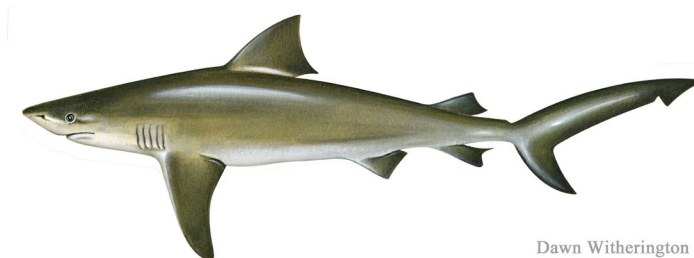


predator that will follow schooling fish. While this species is commonly encountered in recreational fishing because it is very attracted to certain types of bait and struggling fish, it is protected from harvest inside Florida state waters. Great hammerheads are considered potentially dangerous sharks to humans. Due to its large size and variety of prey, this shark should be treated with respect and caution.



## Bull Shark

Bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*) prefer to live in Florida's shallow, inshore waters, but they have a great tolerance for a wide range of salinity, meaning they can easily move up rivers into fresh water or onto reefs. They have been found far up the Mississippi and Amazon rivers. Bull sharks are stout-bodied with a short, broad, rounded snout. They can grow to 11 feet and are pale to dark gray on top with a white underside. The pups may display black tips on their fins that fade with age. Bull sharks' thick, wide body may appear sluggish cruising in the shallows, but they are quick, agile and opportunistic hunters, and are a popular target among sport fishermen. Because of the bull shark's aggressive personality, it is one of the top three most dangerous sharks in the world to humans along with great whites and tiger sharks.

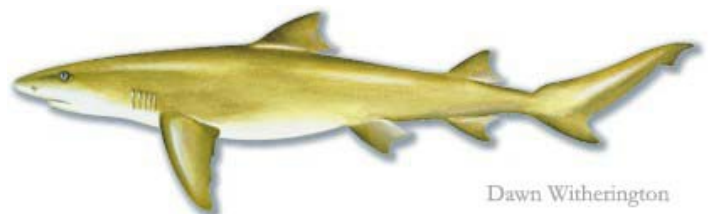


## Great Hammerhead Shark

The great hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna mokarran*) is the largest in the hammerhead family, reaching a maximum length of about 18 feet. It gets its name from its hammer-shaped head, which is nearly straight with a shallow notch in the center, distinguishing it from the smooth hammerhead and scalloped hammerhead. It is highly migratory, yet can be seen inshore frequently because it is a voracious

## Lemon Shark

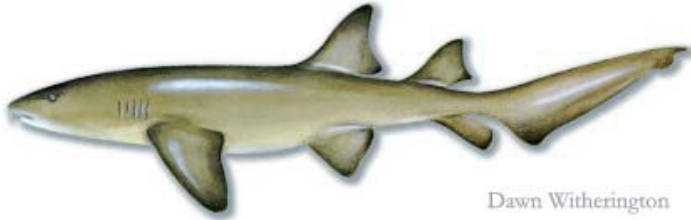
The lemon shark (*Negaprion brevirostris*) is a yellow-gray shark most commonly found in Florida's southern coastal waters, especially around wrecks and ledges. In fact, it is highly site-attached to the bays of Florida and the lower-mid Keys. It is a top predator in these ecosystems along with the bull shark. It commonly enters estuarine waters and often ventures into freshwater areas, but does not penetrate as far up rivers as the bull shark. It can grow to 11 feet and weigh over 200 pounds, but most do not exceed 9 feet. Since 2009, the lemon shark has been protected from harvest inside Florida state waters. That said, it is one of the most commonly encountered species in catch-and-release recreational fisheries, and is a great candidate for this due to its abundance and robustness.



## Nurse Shark

The nurse shark (*Ginglymostoma cirratum*) is rusty or yellow-brown and is one of the few sharks that can be found lying on the ocean floor. It sometimes hides under ledges and wrecks. Nurse sharks are recognized by fleshy appendages called barbels that hang below the nose and help detect prey. They can grow to 14 feet but most often range from 6 to 9 feet and weigh an average of 300 pounds. Valued in the Caribbean for its high-quality hide, the nurse shark is

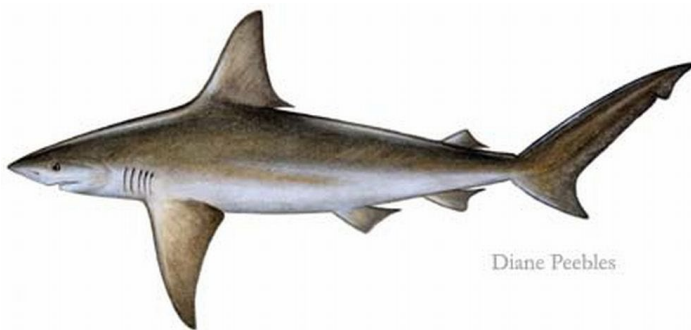
considered a nuisance species in most North American longline fisheries, with fins and meat of little value. Though relatively slow and sluggish, it can be dangerous to humans if aggravated.



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## Sandbar Shark

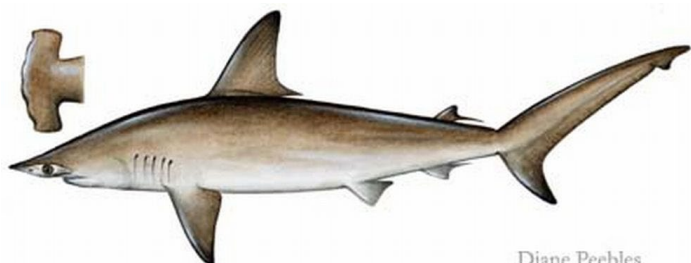
The sandbar shark (*Carcharhinus plumbeus*), also called the brown shark, is found nearshore typically at depths ranging from 60 to 200 feet. It is brown or gray with a white underside. In late winter and early spring, sandbar sharks migrate to their mating grounds in Florida's warm waters. Many will stay until October, and then return to Virginia to pup. Most of the individuals that come nearshore are female. In terms of commercial harvest, this species is the most harvested in the Atlantic, accounting for many of the state's commercial landings, despite the fact that many sandbar populations have declined in recent decades.



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## Scalloped Hammerhead Shark

The scalloped hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna lewini*) is predatory, feeding mainly on fish, squid and stingrays. It has a distinctive, flattened head extending to hammer-like lobes on each side. It ranges from 6 feet to 12 feet. The Florida record is 991 pounds. It is often confused with the

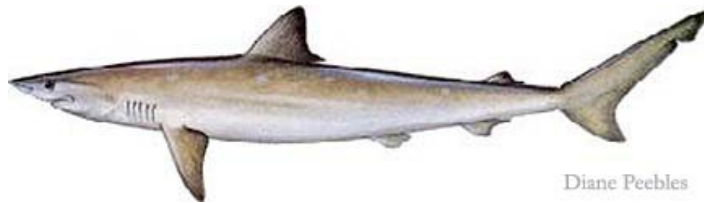


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much less abundant but larger great hammerhead but can be distinguished from the great hammerhead by the curved backside of its head, which differs from the straight edge found on the great hammerhead. This species is protected from harvest inside Florida state waters.

## Sharpnose Shark

The sharpnose shark (*Rhizoprionodon terraenovae*) is an inshore species common in bays and estuaries. Adults occur offshore. This small species, 2 to 4 feet long, is characterized by a long and flattened snout, a slender body, a brown to olive-gray body color with a white underside, and distinctive small white spots on its back. Adults feed on small fish and crustaceans. It is commonly caught by Florida anglers. While large numbers are taken as bycatch in the United States shrimp trawling industry and grouper longline fishery, it is a targeted commercial species that accounts for about 30 percent of the total catch in the shark longline fishery.



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## Spinner Shark

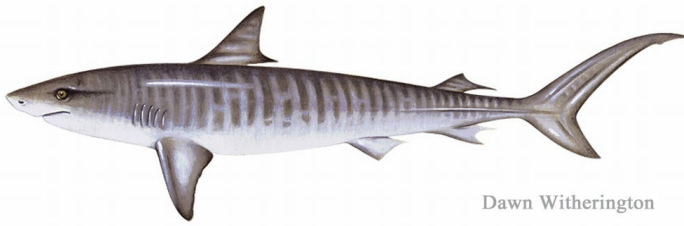
The spinner shark (*Carcharhinus brevipinna*) is a large and slender, fast-swimming shark that often leaps "spinning" out of the water. It feeds primarily on fishes like sardines and herrings but also on small sharks and rays. It is gray-bronze with a white belly and is often mistaken for the blacktip shark but is distinguished by the dark tip on its anal fin. Commonly found in coastal waters, it grows to an average of about 6 feet.



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## Tiger Shark

The tiger shark (*Galeocerdo cuvier*) gets its name from the dark stripes on its body that fade as the shark matures. It is one of the larger shark species; the largest individuals are believed to exceed 18 feet and 2,000 pounds. This is a true apex predator with a very broad diet, and it can be seen throughout Florida in both the Gulf and Atlantic. Adults mature at approximately 9 feet and are relatively rare, yet it is thought they come inshore to give birth to their pups in the late summer. This species is protected from harvest inside Florida state waters.



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