

A SEA MONSTER'S TALE: In Search of the Basking Shark – Colin Speedie. Published in hard covers by Wild Nature Press [www.wildnaturepress.com] at £18.00. 296 162mm x 242mm pages, with a limited number of drawings and colour photos. ISBN 978-0-9573-9468-1

When I agreed to review a book about basking sharks I anticipated a well-researched but relatively slim volume full of photos and drawings with explanatory captions, covering the usual details of life-cycle, worldwide habitats, preferred diet, etc etc ... but relatively little text. Other than the 'well-researched' aspect I could hardly have been more wrong. Although fascinating, with more than 260 pages of punishingly small text A Sea Monster's Tale could not be described as a quick read. Colin Speedie cheerfully admits to being addicted to basking sharks and anything to do with them, and by the time they finish his book the reader will either have caught at least some of his passion, or feel they know far more about the species than they ever wished to. Fortunately Colin is an entertaining writer who keeps the narrative moving at all times.

A Sea Monster's Tale leads off with a very brief introduction covering most of the points outlined in the previous paragraph. This is followed by chapters on 'The Early History', 'The First Hunters' (up to the late 19th century) – both illustrated with clear, black-and-white line drawings – and 'Changing Views', covering the early years of the 20th century, when basking sharks came to be seen, in some areas at least, as a threat to local fishing industries.

It was not until the late 1930s that the species began to be hunted commercially in the UK, mainly for the high-grade oil which could be obtained from its liver. But it was not a simple undertaking, as first Anthony Watkins, and then Gavin Maxwell, discovered the hard way. Both attempted to establish fisheries on the west coast of Scotland and both were, eventually, defeated. Watkins appeared to be on the verge of success when the Second World War intervened – he was an officer in the British Army's Supplementary Reserve – and when he returned to the hunt in 1945 it was to find that he had competition from Maxwell (who sounds to have been a great deal less organised). The central part of A Sea Monster's Tale comprises detailed accounts of both men's efforts, apparently based largely on their own two books – The Sea my Hunting Ground (AW) and Harpoon at a Venture (GM), both now long out of print. It is ironic that Maxwell is remembered largely for being an early proponent of animal conservation due to his later, and much better-known, Ring of Bright Water.

From Scotland, Colin Speedie moves on to post-war shark fishing on the west coast of Ireland and around Vancouver Island in the Pacific, where sharks were killed in great numbers – mainly by ramming and shooting – at the behest of local salmon-fishermen, who blamed them for damage to their nets. This was so 'successful' that the species was virtually wiped out, with no real sign of recovery some 50 years later.

Only on page 168 does the author enter the story in person, first as a small boy fascinated

by these giant fish, and then as a young man with his first cruising boat, who fortuitously encounters a small group of basking sharks on his first cross-Channel trip. This was the start of a lifetime of study and on-the-water research, much of it in the same Scottish waters fished by Watkins and Maxwell more than 40 years previously, as well as around the southwest coast of England. It seems likely that Colin Speedie has made more basking shark sightings than anyone else alive today, mainly from the decks of his own yachts, the 11.7m Forever Changes and his current boat Pèlerin, an Ovni 43. He has also planted many electronic tags in an effort to learn more about the life-cycle and migratory habits of a species about which, even now, relatively little is known. With little formal training but limitless enthusiasm and determination, he is the classic 'citizen scientist', willing to fight the elements in pursuit of data and the authorities to put that data to good use – in this case to get basking sharks added to the CITES list of endangered and vulnerable species, finally achieved in February 2003.

A Sea Monster's Tale concludes with an assessment of continuing threats to the species, from unintentional harassment by commercial shark-watching boats to wind farms, tidal turbines and the effects of climate change on the sharks' food supply. Absolutely nothing of relevance is omitted from this book, which is rounded off by a 14-page source list and a useful index. Also very near the end are the only colour photographs – eight pages, the majority taken by Colin himself. It would have been good to have had more.

Reading A Sea Monster's Tale requires time and some concentration, but repays them in full. Most cruising yachtsmen are interested in the marine environment, and reading this book will open a window on a creature which is widely known but rarely seen ... though thanks to Colin and others like him this may not always be the case as, very slowly, their numbers begin to recover.

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