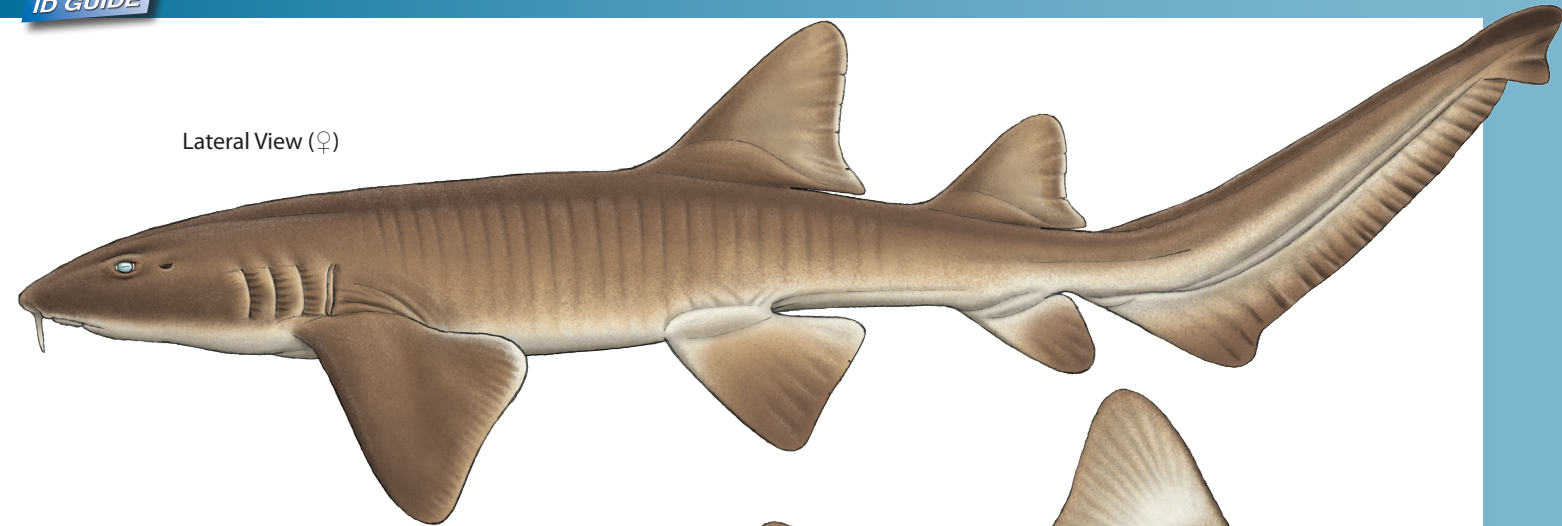
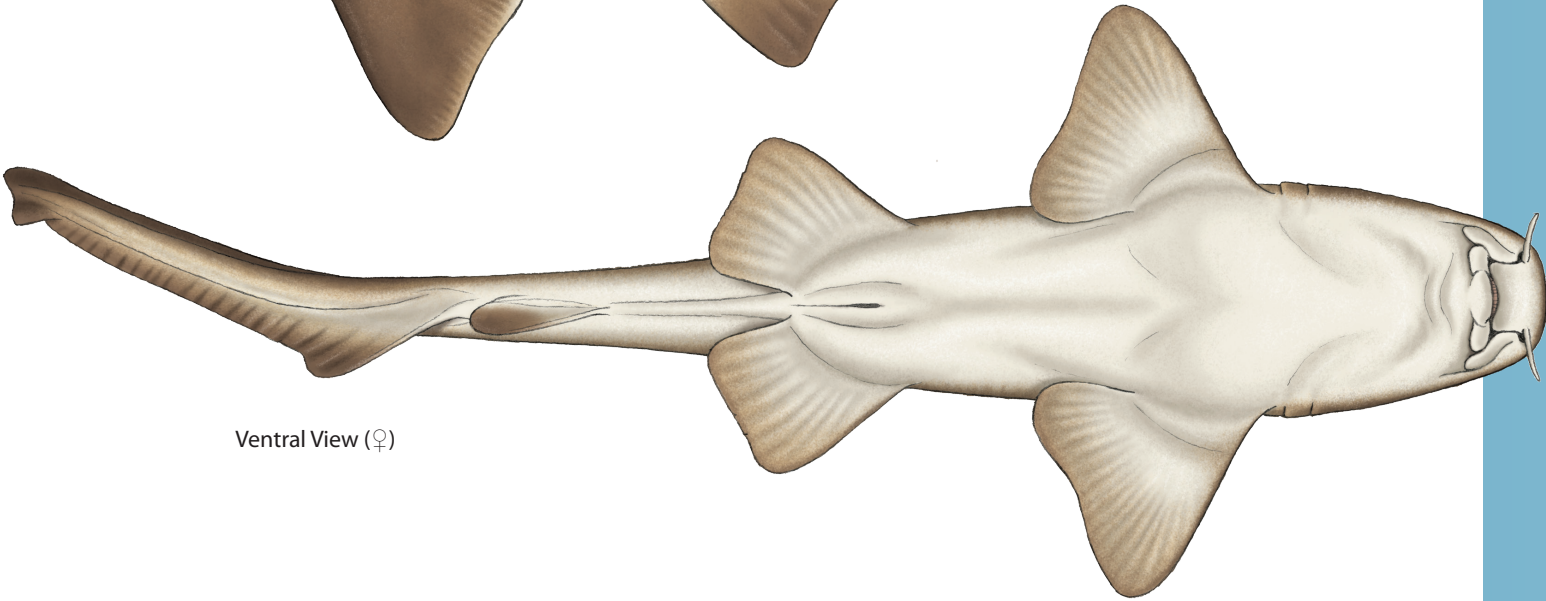


Lateral View (♀)



Ventral View (♀)



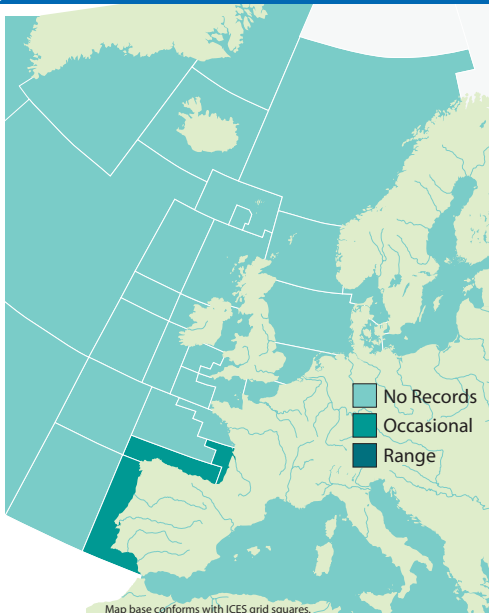
COMMON NAMES

Nurse Shark, Carpet Shark, Requin Nourrice (Fr), Gata Nodriza (Es).

SYNONYMS

Squalus cirratus (Bonnaterre, 1788), *Squalus punctulatus* (Lacépède, 1800), *Squalus cirrhatus* (Bloch & Schneider, 1801), *Ginglymostoma cirratum* (Jordan, 1905), *Squalus punctatus* (Bloch & Schneider, 1801), *Scyllium cirrhosum* (Griffith & Smith), *Ginglymostoma cirrosum* (Müller & Henle, in Bonaparte, 1838), *Squalus argus* (Bancroft, 1832), *Ginglymostoma fulvum* (Poey, 1858), *Ginglymostoma caboverdianus* (Capello, 1867), *Ginglymostoma cirrotum* (Gudger, 1914).

DISTRIBUTION



The Nurse Shark is found in the temperate and tropical waters of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. In the east Atlantic it is known from Senegal to Gabon with a single record from the Gulf of Gascogne, France (Compagno, 2001). In 2001, an unidentified shark encountered by divers near Alderney was claimed to be the Nurse Shark.

APPEARANCE

- Mouth near tip of snout with a barbel each side.
- Very small eyes.
- Dorsal fins and anal fin broadly rounded.
- Second dorsal fin nearly as large as first.
- First dorsal fin originates over or behind pelvic fin origins.
- No distinct ventral caudal lobe.
- Light yellow to dark brown in colour.
- Juveniles <60cm TL have small dark spots surrounded by lighter areas.
- Juveniles 70-120cm TL are capable of limited colour change.

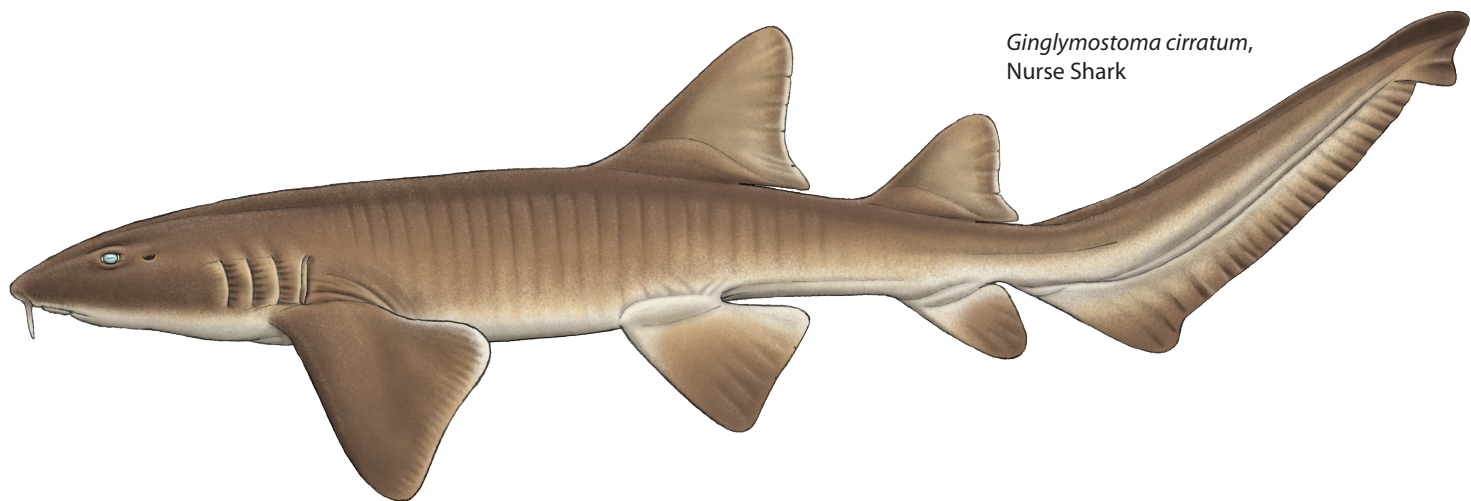
The Nurse Shark is distinctive in the North Atlantic due to its rather dorsoventrally flattened head and nasal barbels. The eyes and spiracles are minute and the mouth is set far forward. It has two large, rounded dorsal fins without spines, the first larger than the second, and broadly rounded pectoral and pelvic fins. The caudal fin is moderately long, more than a quarter of the total length of the shark (Compagno, 2001).

Adults range from uniform light yellow to dark brown in colour. Juveniles may have dark spots surrounded by areas of lighter pigmentation. Juveniles around 70-120cm total length are capable of limited colour changes responding to light. Unusually coloured lighter individuals are reported quite regularly (Guarracino, Unknown).

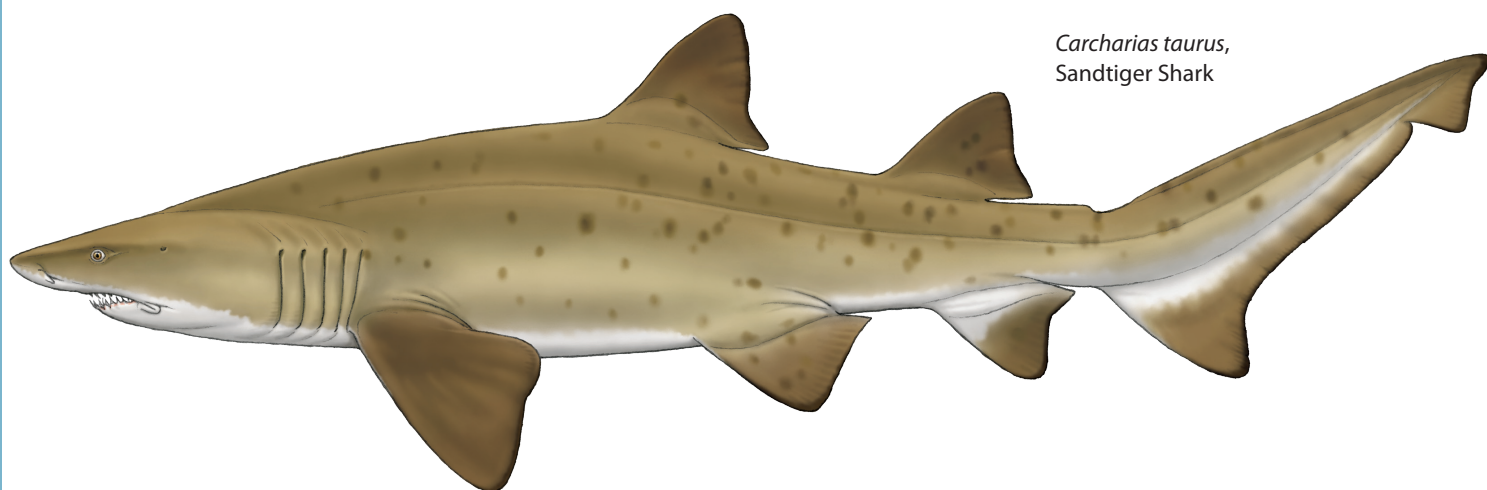
SIMILAR SPECIES

Carcharias taurus, Sandtiger Shark

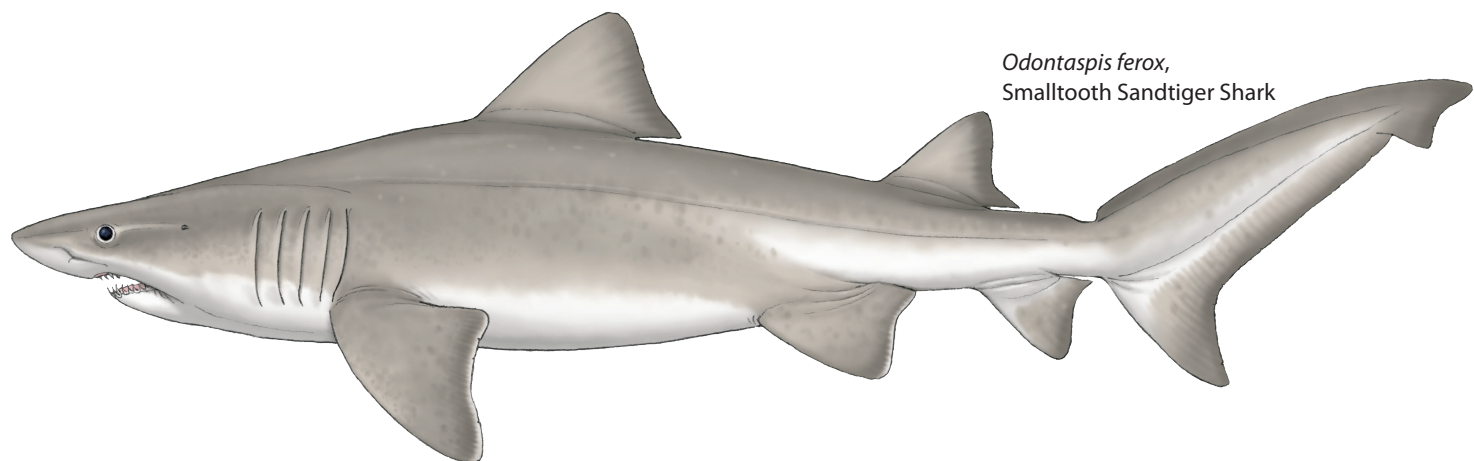
Odontaspis ferox, Smalltooth Sandtiger Shark



Ginglymostoma cirratum,
Nurse Shark



Carcharias taurus,
Sandtiger Shark

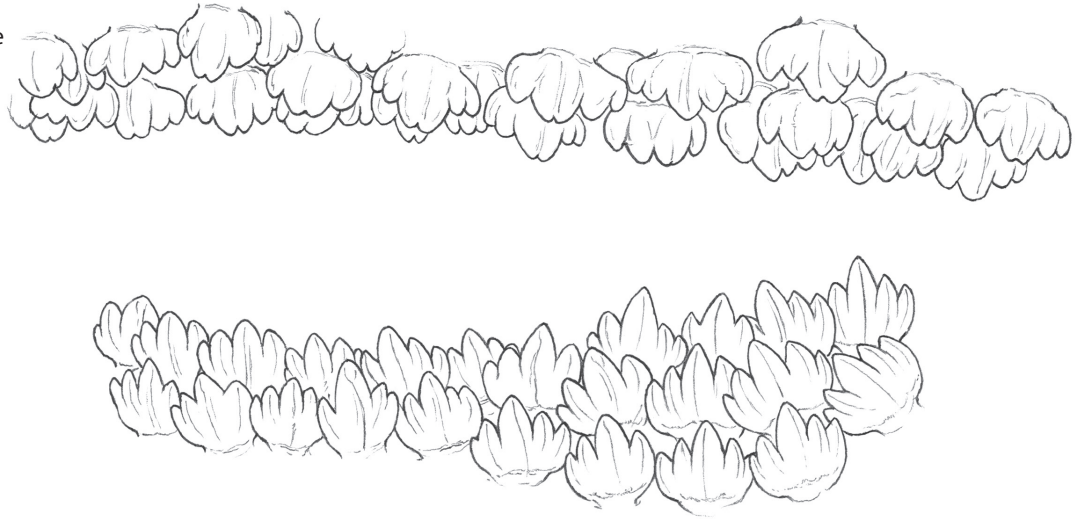


Odontaspis ferox,
Smalltooth Sandtiger Shark

(Not to scale)

TEETH

The teeth have broad cusps with 2–6 cusplets on either side. They do not overlap as in some species so can be replaced individually. There are 30–42 upper rows and 28–34 lower rows (Compagno, 2001).



ECOLOGY AND BIOLOGY

HABITAT

The Nurse Shark is a predominantly demersal species found from 1–75m on sandy or rocky bottoms, although it has been found to 130m off Brazil (Guarracino, Unknown; Compagno, 2001). It is a nocturnal species and lies very close together during the day in groups of up to 40, even piling on top of each other. It is very active at night moving into shallower waters to feed before returning to deeper water to rest during the day. It shows strong site fidelity and often returns to the same cave or crevice each night. Juveniles up to 170cm are generally found shallower than adults around coral reefs, grass flats or mangroves in 1–4 metres of water (Guarracino, Unknown).

DIET

The Nurse Shark feeds predominantly on bottom dwelling invertebrates such as spiny lobsters, shrimps, crabs, sea urchins, squids, octopi, marine snails and bivalves. It is also known to feed on fish such as sea catfish, mullets, puffers and stingrays. Algae is sometimes reported from stomach contents. It is thought to use its small mouth and large, bellow-like pharynx to suck in food items at high speed. Combined with its nocturnal habits, this may allow it to catch active reef fish that would normally be too fast (Compagno, 2001).

Young sharks have been observed resting on their pectoral fins with their snout raised. It is thought that this is to provide a false shelter for crabs which can then easily be consumed. When feeding in aquariums, it has been observed cruising in circles with its barbels touching the floor. When it touches a food item it may overshoot but quickly backs up to suction up the food. It may also cover vertical surfaces in this way (Compagno, 2001).

REPRODUCTION

Female Nurse Sharks reach sexual maturity at a total length of around 225cm, males at a length of around 210cm. As it mates in well studied areas such as the Florida Keys and Dry Tortugas, its mating behaviour is among the best known of any shark. Males approach resting females and bite them on a pectoral fin. They then attempt to roll the female onto her side so a clasper can be inserted into the female's cloaca. As a large number of males generally attempt to mate with a single female, they often carry numerous scars on their flanks and pectoral fins (Guarracino, Unknown). For a more complete discussion of mating, see Carrier *et al* (1994).

It is an ovoviviparous species with a gestation period of around 6 months. Litters of 20–30 pups are born in the late spring and early summer. It then takes 18 months for the ovaries to produce mature eggs, making reproduction biennial. The pups measure 27–30cm total length (Guarracino, Unknown).

COMMERCIAL IMPORTANCE

The Nurse Shark is targeted and taken as bycatch in coastal fisheries using gillnets and longlines. Its meat, fins, liver oil and hides can all be utilised. It is targeted by spear-fishers due to its sedentary and docile nature and is prized in competitions (Gibson *et al.*, 2006).

THREATS, CONSERVATION, LEGISLATION

Major threats to the Nurse Shark include intentional and accidental capture in coastal fisheries, spear-fishing, capture for the ornamental fish trade, habitat destruction and pollution. It is actively targeted in parts of its range using gillnets and lines for its skin, fins and meat. Gene flow between areas is thought to be limited and localised population declines have been recorded. However, the global status of the species is unknown and it has only limited protection from commercial, artisanal and recreational fisheries (Rosa *et al.*, 2006).

IUCN RED LIST ASSESSMENT

Data Deficient (2008).

HANDLING AND THORN ARRANGEMENT

- Handle with care.
- Sharp teeth.
- Abrasive skin.

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Text: Richard Hurst.
Illustrations: Marc Dando.

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