



*Identification Guide to*  
**SHARKS**  
*of Mississippi*

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By Dr. Eric Hoffmayer, Jim Franks and John Shelley  
*The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Research Laboratory  
Center for Fisheries Research and Development*

*The development of this guide was made possible by the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Program.*

## PREFACE

This guide was developed to assist anglers, charter boat captains, marine enforcement officers, biologists, commercial fishers and others in the identification of sharks that occur in or near the coastal and marine waters of Mississippi. Species included in the guide were selected based on their relative occurrence and probability of encounter within Mississippi's inshore (north of the barrier islands) and offshore (south of the barrier islands) waters.

The guide provides a shark illustration which highlights external anatomical features used to identify the various species. An identification "key," photographs, descriptions of unique physical characteristics, and general information for each species assist users in correctly identifying the sharks,

particularly similar species that are easily confused.

It is the intent of the authors that this user-friendly guide serve as a useful field identification aid as well as a source of general information on local sharks. Considering the overfished status of numerous shark populations, individuals who catch sharks, particularly female sharks during pupping season, might choose to release them unharmed once they are identified by quick reference to this guide. It is anticipated that the guide represents the initial step in the development of an angler-based, cooperative tagging program for sharks in Mississippi waters.

This guide was developed with a grant from the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sport Fish Restoration Program.

## SHARKS PRESENTED IN THIS GUIDE

<b>Bonnethead</b> ..... <i>Sphyrna tiburo</i>	<b>Dusky shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus obscurus</i>
<b>Scalloped hammerhead</b> ..... <i>Sphyrna lewini</i>	<b>Silky shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus falciformis</i>
<b>Great hammerhead</b> ..... <i>Sphyrna mokarran</i>	<b>Atlantic sharpnose shark</b> .. <i>Rhizoprionodon terraenovae</i>
<b>Tiger shark</b> ..... <i>Galeocerdo cuvier</i>	<b>Blacknose shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus acronotus</i>
<b>Lemon shark</b> ..... <i>Negaprion brevirostris</i>	<b>Finetooth shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus isodon</i>
<b>Bull shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus leucas</i>	<b>Spinner shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus brevipinna</i>
<b>Shortfin mako</b> ..... <i>Isurus oxyrinchus</i>	<b>Blacktip shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus limbatus</i>
<b>Sandbar shark</b> ..... <i>Carcharhinus plumbeus</i>	

## GENERAL REPRODUCTIVE INFORMATION ON SHARKS IN THIS GUIDE

Common Name	Female Size at Maturity (feet)**	Litter Size**	Size at Birth (inches)**	Pupping Season
<i>Small Coastal Species</i>				
Atlantic sharpnose	3	1 - 7	13 - 15	May/June
Finetooth	4 - 5	1 - 6	18 - 20	May/June
Bonnethead	3	1 - 16	14 - 16	Aug/Sept
Blacknose	3 - 4	3 - 6	15 - 20	May/June
<i>Large Coastal Species</i>				
Blacktip	5 - 6	1 - 10	18 - 23	May/June
Spinner	6 - 7	3 - 15	24 - 30	May/June
Bull	7 - 8	1 - 15	22 - 32	May/June
Sandbar	5 - 6	1 - 14	22 - 30	May/June
Silky	7 - 8	2 - 14	28 - 34	May/June
Dusky *	9 - 10	3 - 14	27 - 39	May/June
Tiger	11 - 12	10 - 82	20 - 30	May/June
Lemon	7 - 8	4 - 17	24 - 26	May/Aug
Scalloped hammerhead	7 - 8	15 - 31	17 - 22	May/June
Great hammerhead	9 - 10	13 - 42	20 - 28	Aug/Sept
<i>Pelagic Species</i>				
Shortfin mako	9 - 10	8 - 10	24 - 27	Unknown

• Shark Management Category      \* Prohibited Species  
Sharks are managed by state and federal regulations.

\*\* Source: J.D. McEachran and J.D. Fechhelm. 1998. *Fishes of the Gulf of Mexico, Vol. 1: Myxiniiformes to Gasterosteiformes*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1112 pp.

## REFERENCE POINTS FOR TERMS IN GUIDE

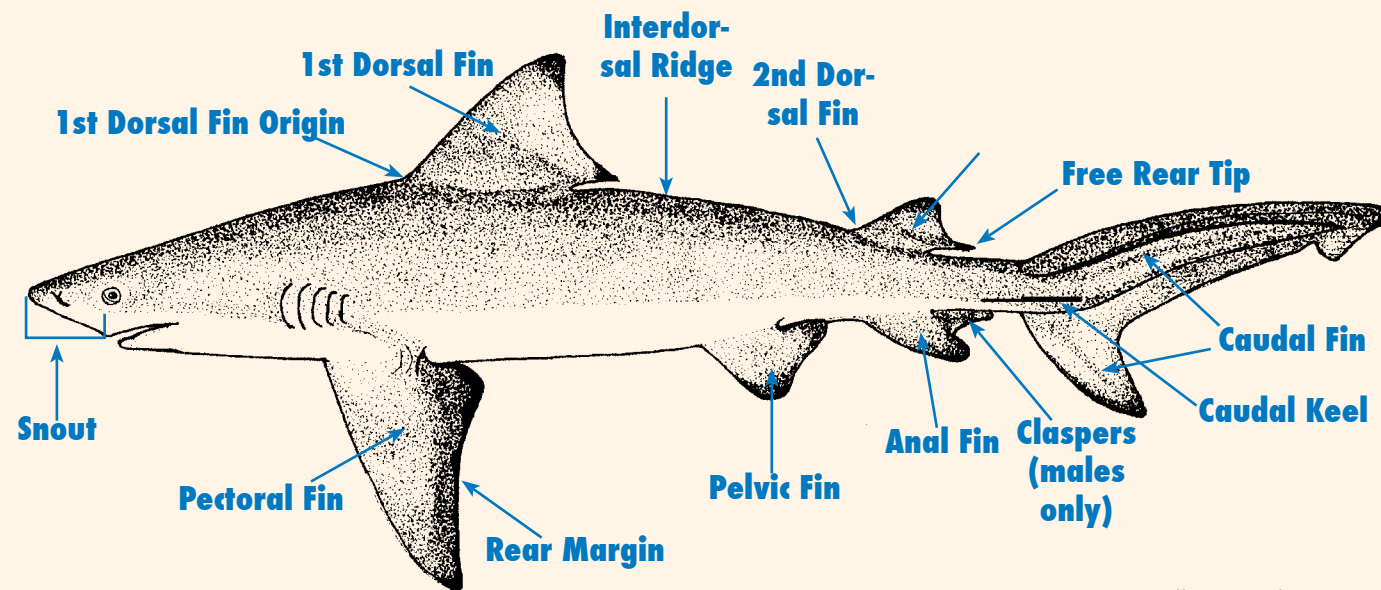


Illustration by Joe Jewell

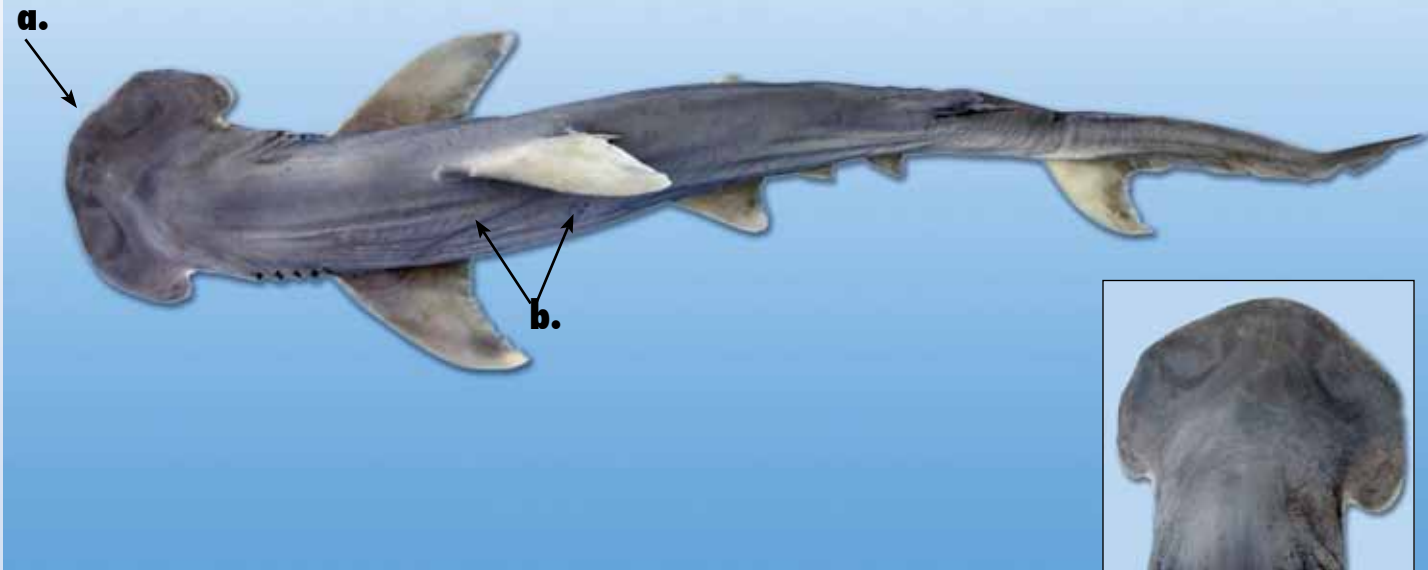
## IDENTIFICATION KEY TO THE SHARKS OF MISSISSIPPI

*This key contains a series of paired descriptive options (1-14) to use in the identification of sharks. Beginning with #1, select the option (a or b) that best applies to your specimen. The number shown at the end of your chosen option will guide you through the key to the next pair of options you must consider. Continue this stepwise process until you identify the correct name of your shark.*

1. a) Head shovel or hammer shaped.....2  
b) Head rounded to pointed .....4
2. a) Head shovel shaped with no center indentation ..... **Bonnethead** (p.7)  
b) Head hammer shaped with center indentation.....3
3. a) Front margin of head broadly arched with center indentation and two shallow notches on each side; pelvic fins with straight rear margin ..... **Scalloped hammerhead** (p.9)  
b) Front margin of head nearly straight with center indentation and one shallow notch on each side; pelvic fins with curved rear margin ..... **Great hammerhead** (p.11)
4. a) Snout short and bluntly rounded .....5  
b) Snout elongated and moderately rounded to pointed .....7
5. a) Black spots or stripes on dorsal surface; teeth serrated and deeply notched..... **Tiger** (p.13)  
b) Body uniform in color; teeth not deeply notched .....6
6. a) 1st and 2nd dorsal fins approximately equal in size; body yellowish-green to brown in color ..... **Lemon** (p.15)  
b) 1st dorsal fin much larger than 2nd dorsal fin; 1st dorsal fin high, triangular, and originates over middle of pectoral fin; body robust and dark gray in color ..... **Bull** (p.17)
7. a) Top and bottom lobes of caudal fin approximately equal in size; body deep blue in color; teeth are long and blade-like, with no serrations; caudal keel present ..... **Shortfin mako** (p.19)

- b) Top lobe of caudal fin longer than bottom lobe; no caudal keel .....8
8. a) Interdorsal ridge present .....9  
b) Interdorsal ridge absent .....11
9. a) 1st dorsal fin high, triangular, and originates over middle of pectoral fin..... **Sandbar** (p.21)  
b) 1st dorsal fin moderately rounded and originates over or well behind rear margin of pectoral fin .....10
10. a) 1st dorsal fin originates over rear margin of pectoral fin; pectoral fin with slightly curved rear margin..... **Dusky** (p.23)  
b) 1st dorsal fin originates well behind rear margin of pectoral fin; 2nd dorsal fin has long free tip..... **Silky** (p.25)
11. a) Origin of 2nd dorsal fin about middle of anal fin base; white spots on dorsal surface of individuals greater than 23" total length ..... **Atlantic sharpnose** (p.27)  
b) Origin of 2nd dorsal fin aligns with origin of anal fin; white spots absent on dorsal surface .....12
12. a) Snout with dusky blotch at tip ..... **Blacknose** (p.29)  
b) Snout without dusky blotch at tip .....13
13. a) Fins not black tipped; 1st dorsal fin originates over rear margin of pectoral fin; body bluish gray..... **Finetooth** (p.31)  
b) All or most of the fins black tipped.....14
14. a) 1st dorsal fin originates behind rear margin of pectoral fin; all fins black tipped; snout longer than mouth width ..... **Spinner** (p.33)  
b) 1st dorsal fin originates over pectoral fin, sometimes over the rear margin; all fins black tipped except anal fin; snout shorter than mouth width ..... **Blacktip** (p.35)

# BONNETHEAD



## SIMILAR SPECIES



Scalloped hammerhead



Great hammerhead

### Key Characteristics

- a. Shovel-shaped head with no center indentation
- b. Small scattered black spots on dorsal surface

### Management Category

Small Coastal

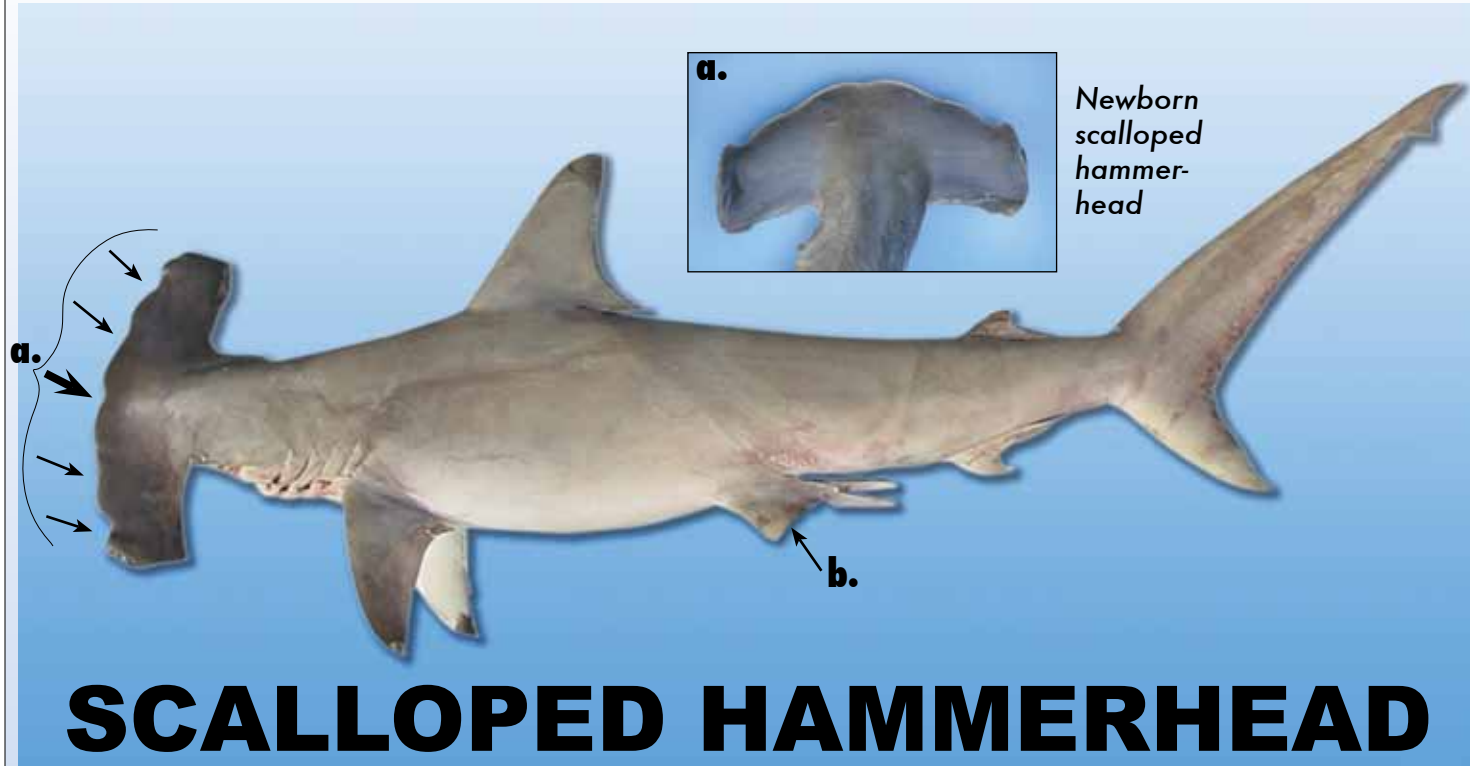
**Maximum Size** 5 ft.

**Common Size** 2 to 4 ft.

### Abundance

Inshore Medium / Offshore Rare

### Similar Species



# SCALLOPED HAMMERHEAD

## SIMILAR SPECIES



Bonnethead



Great hammerhead

## Key Characteristics

- a. Front edge of head broadly arched with center indentation and two shallow notches on each side  
Head of newborn slightly curved
- b. Pelvic fins with straight rear margins

## Management Category

Large Coastal

**Maximum Size** 12 ft.

**Common Size** 5.5 to 8.5 ft.

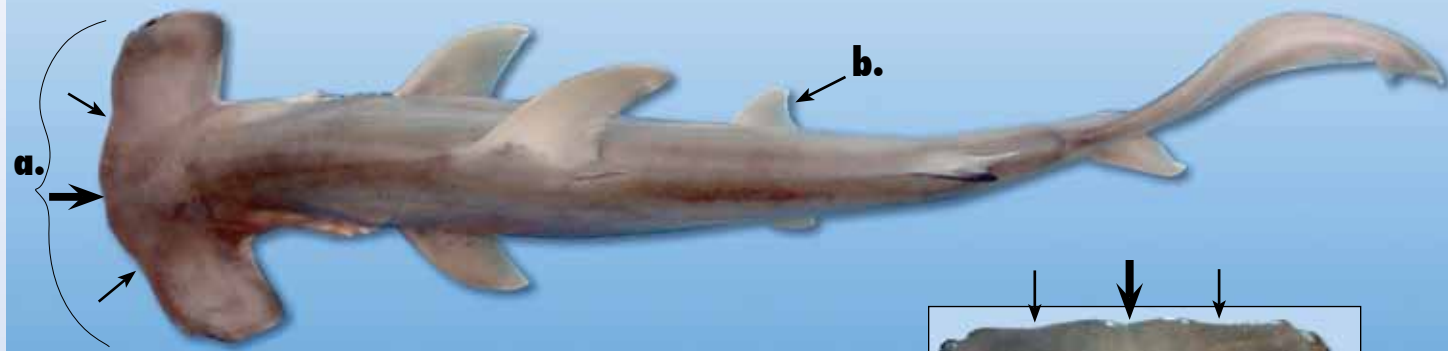
## Abundance

Inshore Rare / Offshore Medium

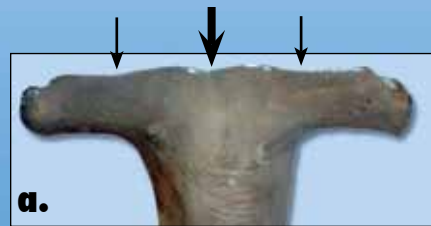
## Similar Species

See adjacent photos

# GREAT HAMMERHEAD



The newborn great hammerhead has a slightly curved head.



Adult great hammerhead

## SIMILAR SPECIES



Bonnethead



Adult scalloped hammerhead

## Key Characteristics

- a. Front margin of head nearly straight with center indentation and one shallow notch on each side
- b. Pelvic fins with curved rear margin

## Management Category

Large Coastal

**Maximum Size** 18.5 ft.

**Common Size** 7 to 10 ft.

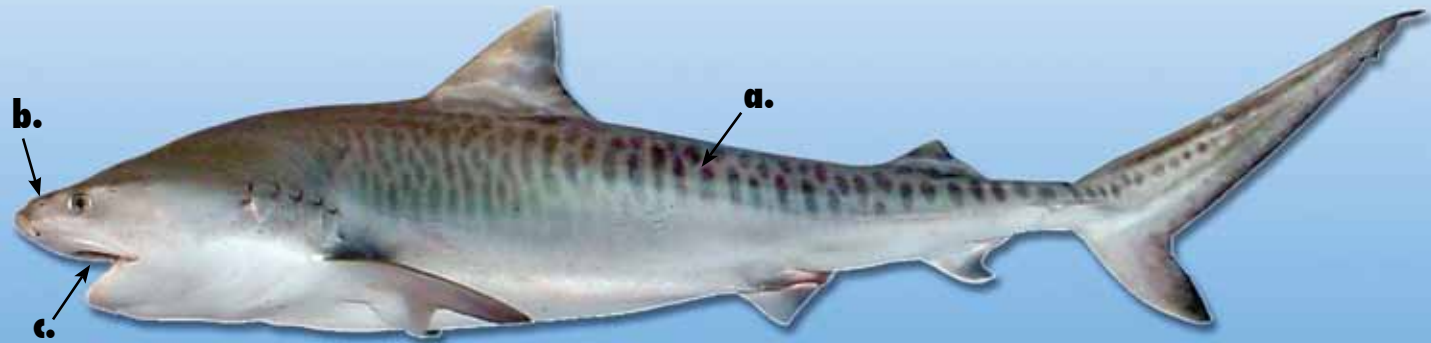
## Abundance

Inshore Rare / Offshore Rare

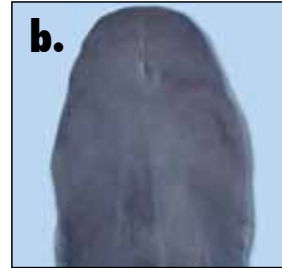
## Similar Species

See adjacent photos

# TIGER



## FEATURES



### Key Characteristics

- a. Black spots or stripes on dorsal surface*
- b. Snout short, bluntly rounded and wide*
- c. Teeth serrated, deeply notched*

### Management Category

*Large Coastal*

**Maximum Size** 20 ft.

**Common Size** 4 to 9 ft.

### Abundance

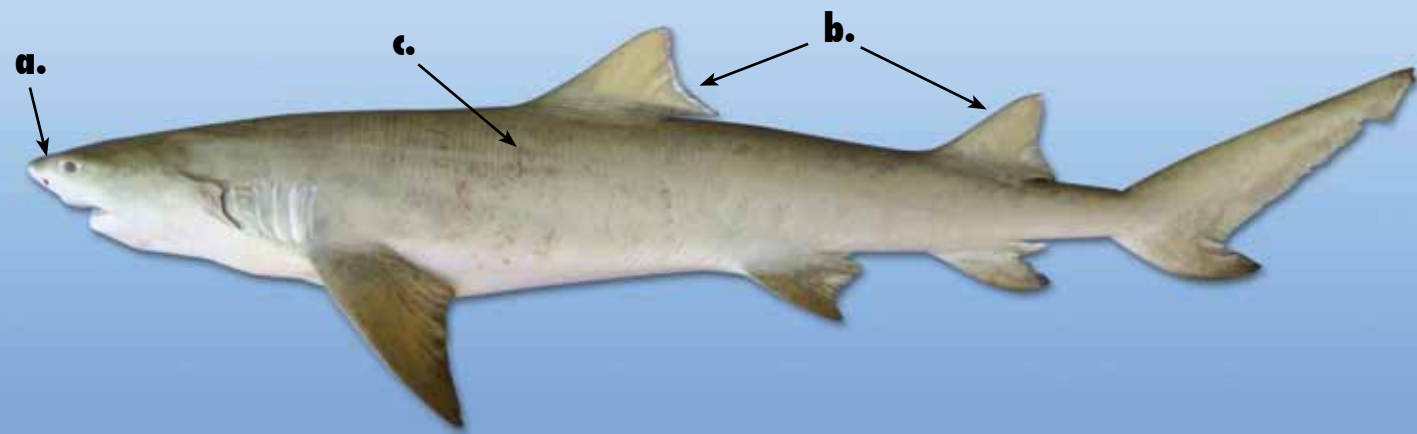
*Inshore Rare / Offshore Medium*

### Similar Species

*None*



# LEMON



## FEATURE



## SIMILAR SPECIES



Nurse shark, *Ginglymostomata cirratum*

## Key Characteristics

- a. Snout short and blunt
- b. 1st and 2nd dorsal fin of similar size
- c. Body color yellowish-green to brown

## Management Category

Large Coastal

**Maximum Size** 11 ft.

**Common Size** 4 to 7 ft.

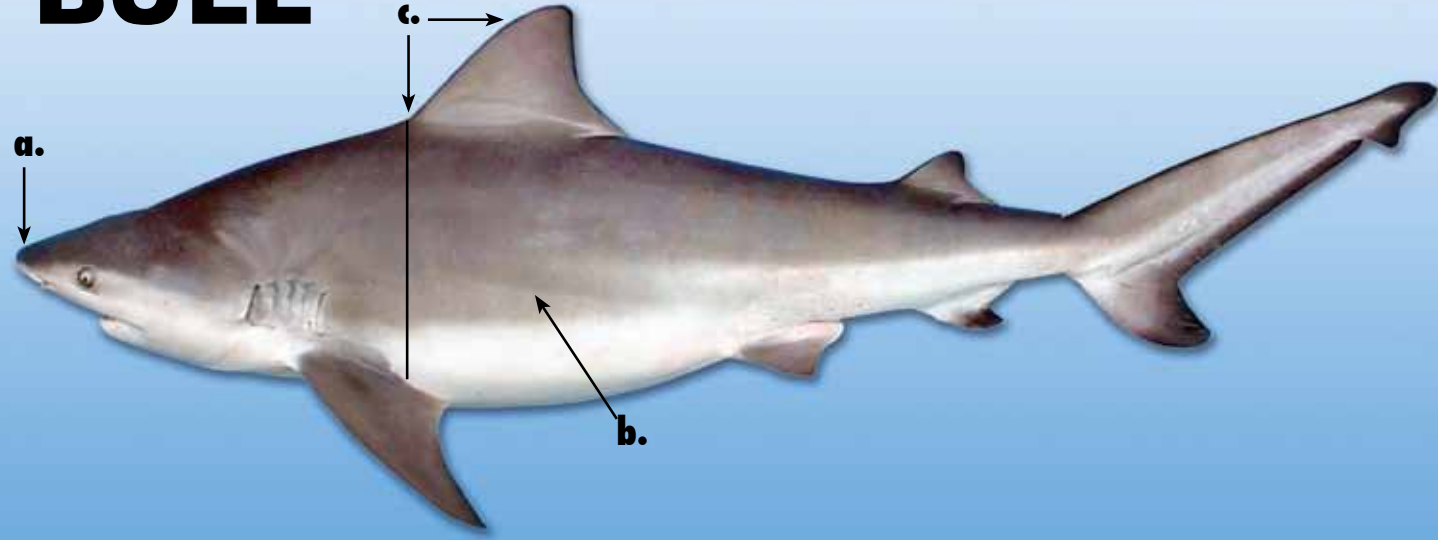
## Abundance

Inshore Rare / Offshore Rare

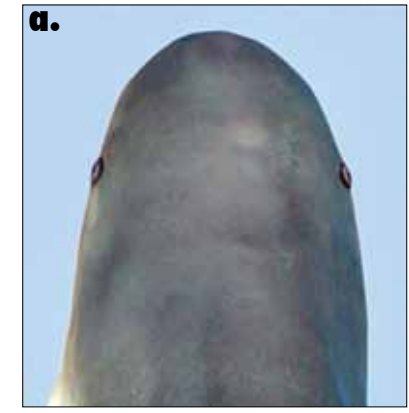
## Similar Species

See adjacent photo

# BULL



## FEATURE



### Key Characteristics

- a. Snout short, blunt and rounded
- b. Body robust
- c. 1st dorsal fin high and triangular; originates over middle of pectoral fin  
*\*no interdorsal ridge*

### Management Category

Large Coastal

**Maximum Size** 11.5 ft.

**Common Size** 3 to 6 ft.

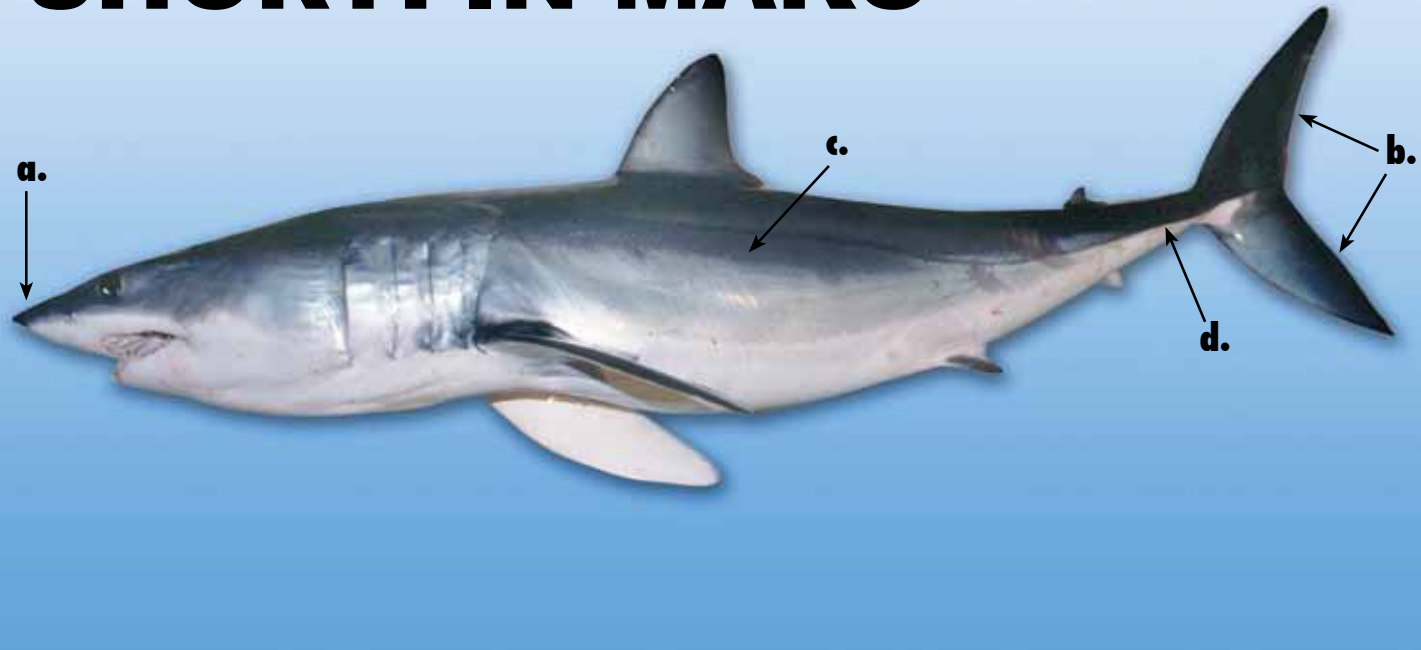
### Abundance

Inshore High / Offshore Medium

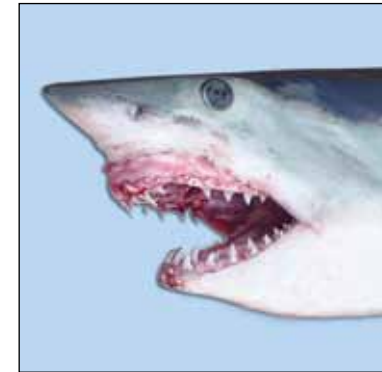
### Similar Species

Sandbar and Blacktip

# SHORTFIN MAKO



## FEATURE



Teeth long and pointed

## Key Characteristics

- a. Snout conical and pointed*
- b. Top and bottom lobes of caudal fin of similar size*
- c. Body color deep blue*
- d. Caudal keel*

## Management Category

*Pelagic*

**Maximum Size** 13 ft.

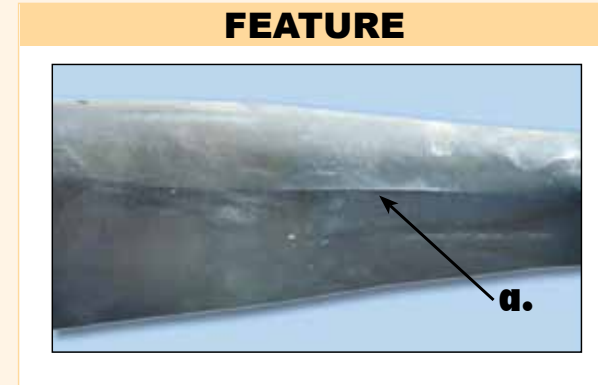
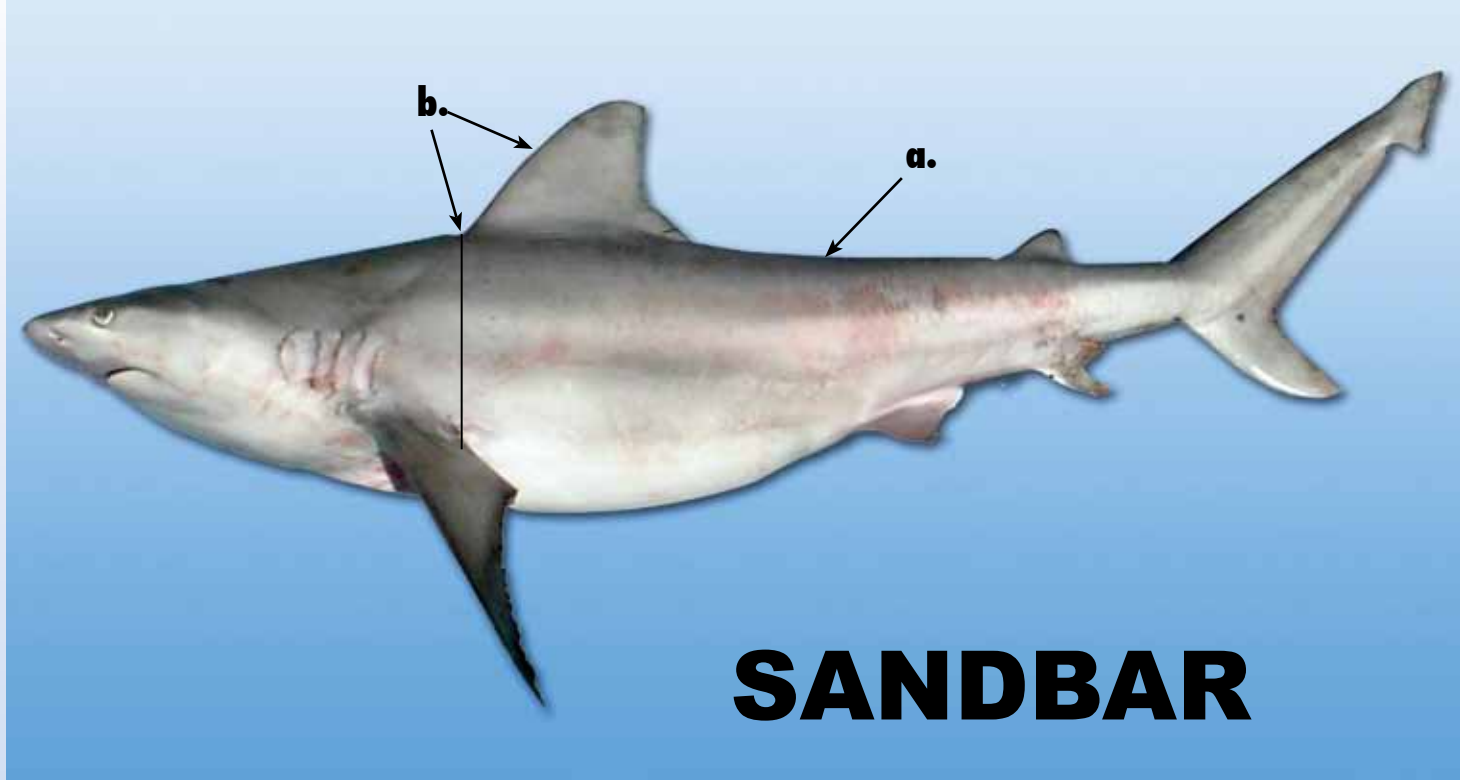
**Common Size** 6 to 9 ft.

## Abundance

*Inshore Rare / Offshore Rare*

## Similar Species

*None*



### **Key Characteristics**

- a. Interdorsal ridge*
- b. 1st dorsal fin high, triangular; originates over middle of pectoral fin*

### **Management Category**

*Large Coastal*

**Maximum Size** 8 ft.

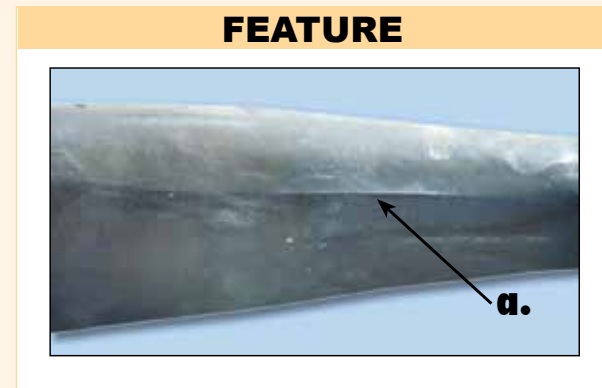
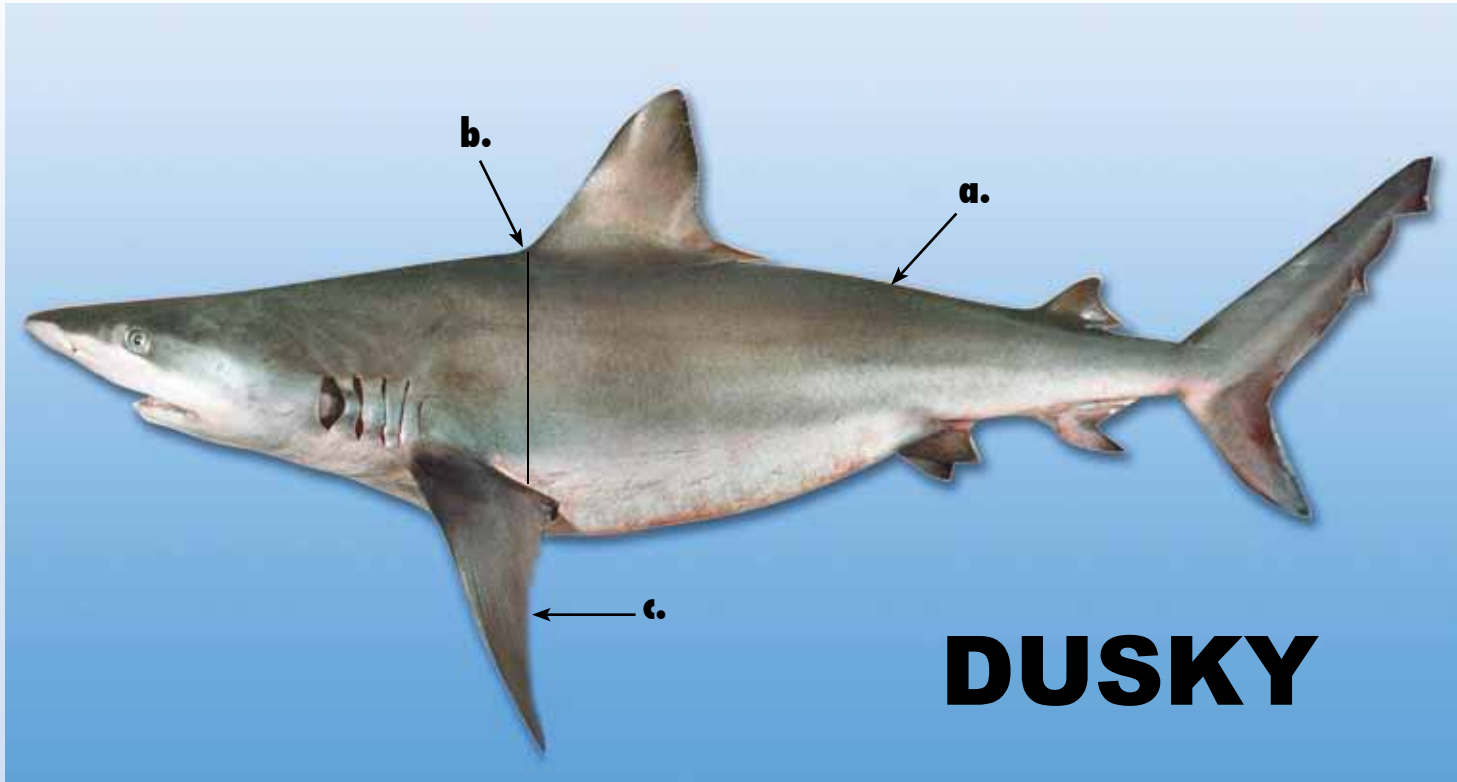
**Common Size** 3 to 6.5 ft.

### **Abundance**

*Inshore Rare / Offshore Medium*

### **Similar Species**

*Bull and Dusky*



### Key Characteristics

- a. Interdorsal ridge
- b. Origin of 1st dorsal fin over rear margin of pectoral fin
- c. Pectoral fin with curved rear margin

### Management Category

**PROHIBITED SPECIES** (no possession)

**Maximum Size** 12 ft.

**Common Size** 5 to 9 ft.

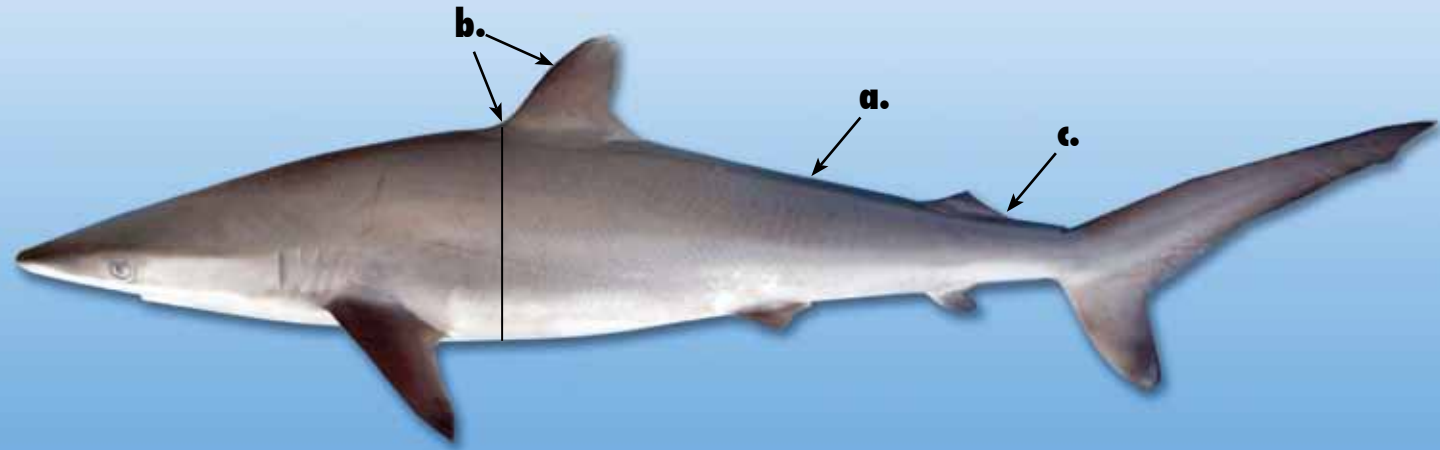
### Abundance

Inshore Rare / Offshore Rare

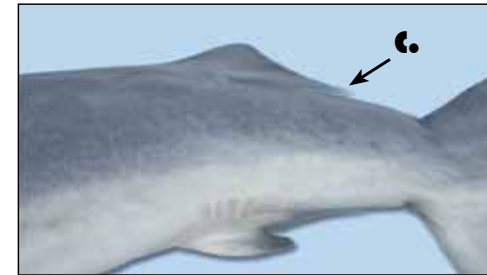
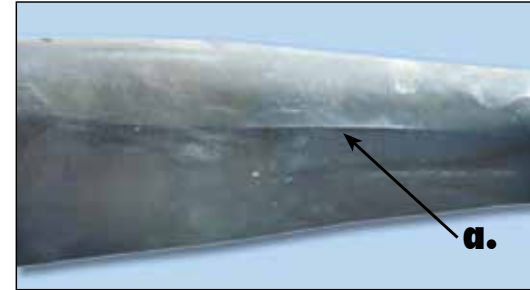
### Similar Species

Silky and Sandbar

# SILKY



## FEATURE



## Key Characteristics

- a. Interdorsal ridge
- b. 1st dorsal fin low, rounded; originates well behind pectoral fin
- c. 2nd dorsal fin with long free rear tip

## Management Category

Large Coastal

**Maximum Size** 11 ft.

**Common Size** 3 to 6 ft.

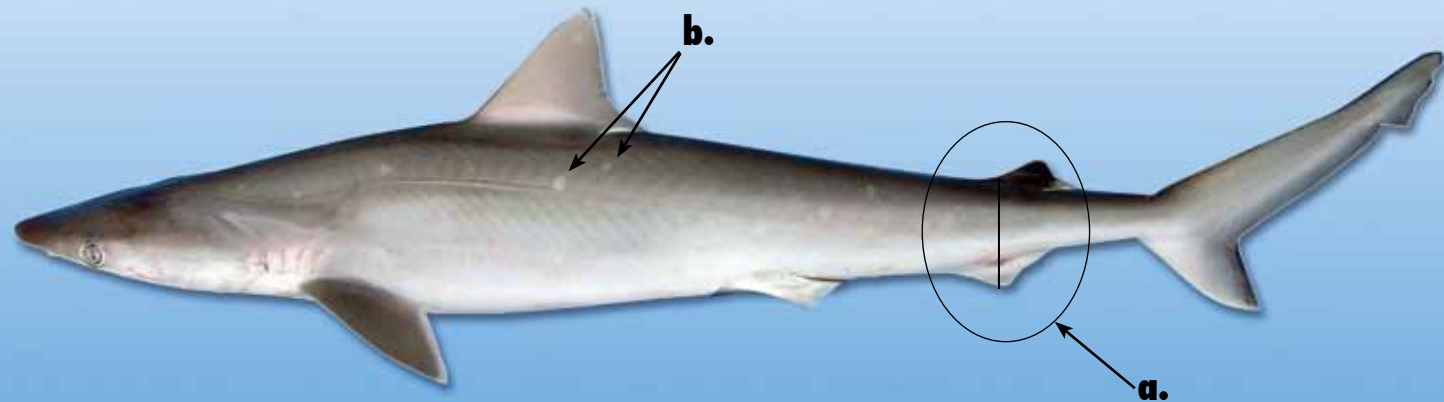
## Abundance

Inshore Rare / Offshore Medium

## Similar Species

Dusky

# ATLANTIC SHARPNOSE



## FEATURE



The young Atlantic sharpnose less than 23 inches does not have white spots on dorsal surface.

## SIMILAR SPECIES



Smalltail Shark, *Carcharhinus porosus*  
2nd dorsal fin is not blacktipped.

## Key Characteristics

- a. Origin of 2nd dorsal about mid-base of anal fin
- b. Several white spots on dorsal surface

## Management Category

Small Coastal

**Maximum Size** 4 ft.

**Common Size** 2 to 3.5 ft.

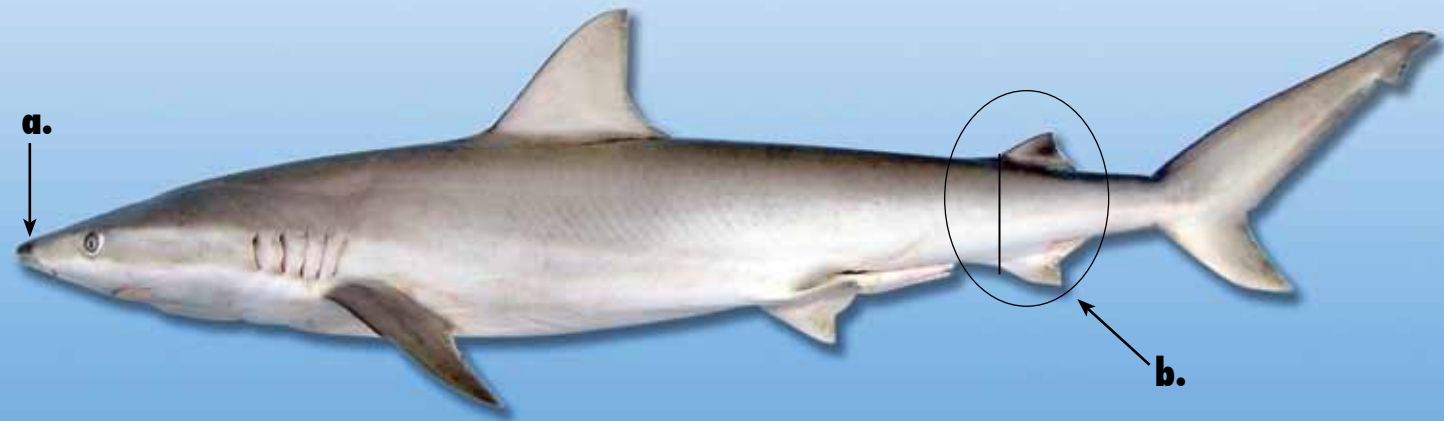
## Abundance

Inshore High / Offshore Medium

## Similar Species

Blacknose, Finetooth, and Smalltail  
(see adjacent photo)

# BLACKNOSE



## FEATURE



### Key Characteristics

- a. Dusky blotch on rounded snout (sometimes faint in adults)
- b. 2nd dorsal fin origin aligns with anal fin origin

### Management Category

Small Coastal

**Maximum Size** 5 ft.

**Common Size** 2.5 to 4 ft.

### Abundance

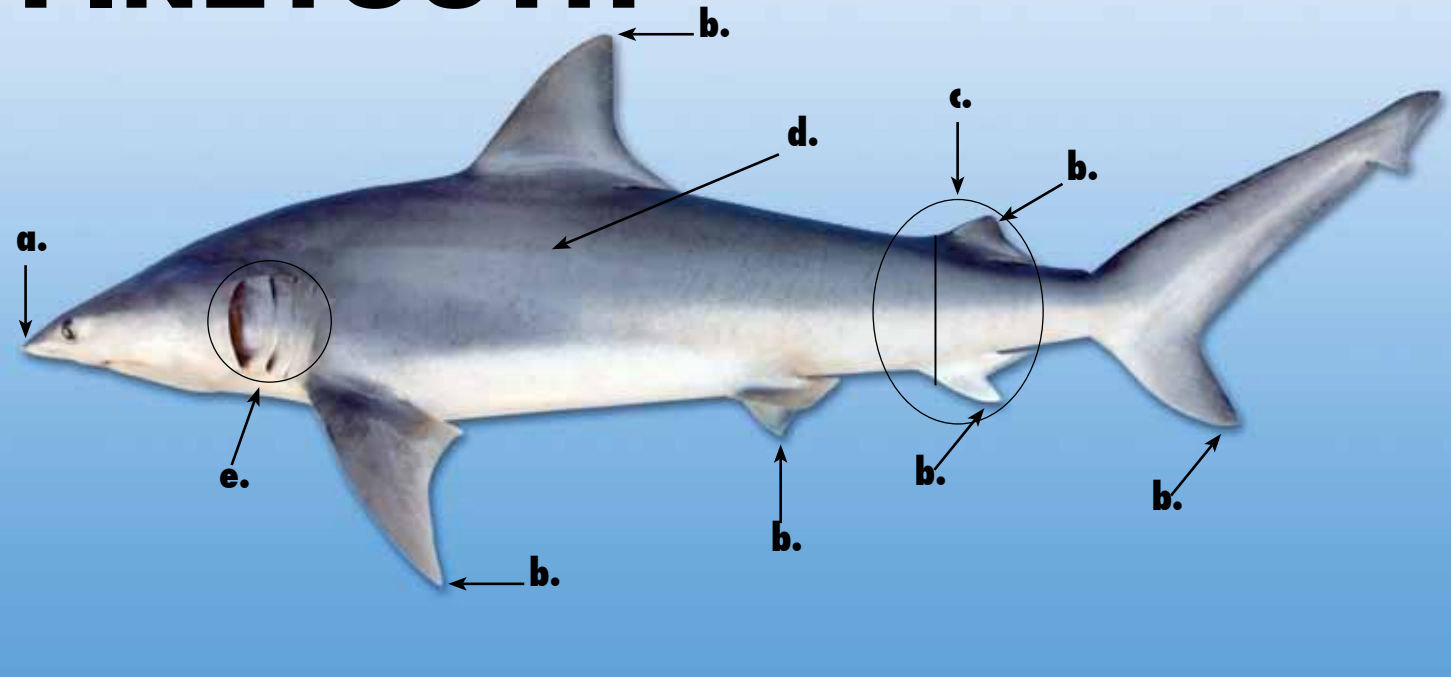
Inshore Rare / Offshore High

### Similar Species

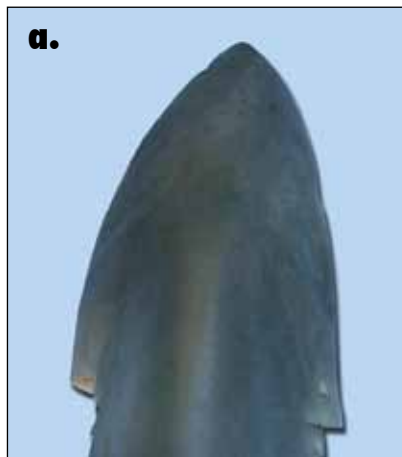
Atlantic sharpnose and Finetooth



# FINETOOTH



## FEATURE



### Key Characteristics

- a. Pointed snout
- b. Fins not black tipped
- c. 2nd dorsal fin origin aligns with anal fin origin
- d. Dorsal surface bluish gray
- e. Long gill slits

### Management Category

Small Coastal

**Maximum Size** 6 ft.

**Common Size** 2 to 4.5 ft.

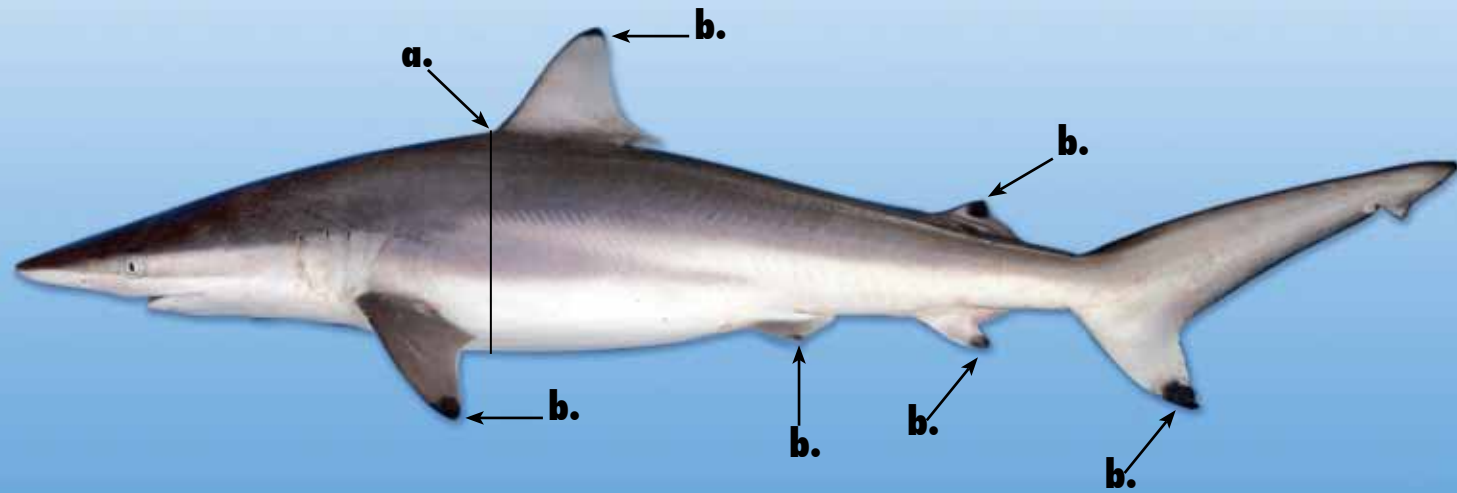
### Abundance

Inshore High / Offshore Rare

### Similar Species

Atlantic sharpnose, Blacknose and Blacktip

# SPINNER



## FEATURE



Anal fin may not be black tipped in young individuals less than 31 inches total length.

## Key Characteristics

- a. Origin of 1st dorsal fin behind rear margin of pectoral fin
- b. All fins black tipped

## Management Category

Large Coastal

**Maximum Size** 9 ft.

**Common Size** 2.5 to 6 ft.

## Abundance

Inshore Medium / Offshore High

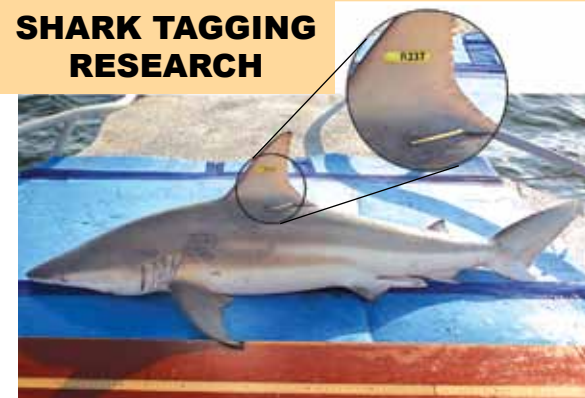
## Similar Species

Blacktip

# BLACKTIP



## SHARK TAGGING RESEARCH



Researchers at GCRL are tagging sharks in Mississippi coastal waters to better understand their growth and movement patterns. Tags are located in the 1st dorsal fin region (see above photo). If a shark is encountered, please call the phone number on the tag and provide the tag number, species of shark, total length and location of capture. Any help that can be provided is appreciated.

### Key Characteristics

- a. Origin of 1st dorsal fin over pectoral fin, sometimes over the rear margin
- b. All fins except anal fin black tipped

### Management Category

Large Coastal

**Maximum Size** 9 ft.

**Common Size** 2 to 5 ft.

### Abundance

Inshore High / Offshore High

### Similar Species

Spinner, Bull and Finetooth

### Photo Credits

R. Dean Grubbs - Mako Shark

Jack Randall - Dusky Shark

James Franks - Mako Closeup

Glenn Parsons - Nurse and Smalltail Sharks

Eric Hoffmayer - Remaining Shark Photos

### Shark Illustration

Joe Jewell



### Guide Reviewers

William Driggers III

Mark Grace

Michael Buchanan

Glenn Parsons

### Graphic Design

Diana Reid



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTHERN  
MISSISSIPPI

GULF COAST RESEARCH  
LABORATORY

We also thank the following people for participating in field research:

Gary Gray

Paul Grammar

Monty Simmons

Mercedes Smith

Steven George

William Dempster

Jason Tilley

Lauren Byrd

Captain and crew of the

**RV Tommy Munro**

GCRL Shark Biology

Summer Classes

Mississippi Deep Sea

Fishing Rodeo



*The University of Southern Mississippi*

### **GULF COAST RESEARCH LABORATORY**

*Center for Fisheries Research and Development*

P. O. Box 7000 • Ocean Springs, MS 39566-7000

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

*Dr. Eric Hoffmayer • Phone: (228) 872-4257 • Email: [eric.hoffmayer@usm.edu](mailto:eric.hoffmayer@usm.edu)*