



[RECENT STORIES \(HTTPS://WWW.CHEESAPEAKEBAY.NET/NEWS/BLOG\)](https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/blog) >

[WATERSHED SCIENCE \(HTTPS://WWW.CHEESAPEAKEBAY.NET/NEWS/BLOG/CATEGORY/WATERSHED-SCIENCE\)](https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/blog/category/watershed-science) >

Are there sharks in the Chesapeake Bay?

There are at least 12 species of sharks found in the Bay. Some are quite abundant, while others are very rare.

BY [LINDSAY ENEY \(HTTPS://WWW.CHEESAPEAKEBAY.NET/NEWS/BLOG/AUTHOR/LINDSAYENEY\)](https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/blog/author/lindsayeney) | FEBRUARY 11, 2022



The sandbar shark is the most common shark species that visits the Chesapeake Bay, but at least 12 species can be found. (Photo by Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program)

During hot summer months people in the Chesapeake Bay region spend more and more time on and in the water, which often leads to one of the biggest questions and concerns about safety in the Bay: Are there sharks in the Bay?

The answer to the question is, yes. At least 12 species of sharks are known to visit parts of the Bay, and can be found here between summer and fall. However, these sharks rarely pose a threat to human safety.

There are no recorded shark attacks in the Chesapeake Bay according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, and the International Shark Attack File notes only a few attacks occurring in Maryland and Virginia's coastal waters.

As with any wild creature, you'll want to be cautious. Sharks may be cool to look at, but the best option for their safety and yours is to leave them alone.

The Chesapeake's most common sharks

Sandbar shark

The most common shark found in the Chesapeake is the [sandbar shark](/fieldguide/critter/sandbar_shark) (/fieldguide/critter/sandbar_shark). The sandbar shark can be found in the Atlantic Ocean from Massachusetts all the way to southern Brazil, and is a seasonal visitor to the Chesapeake Bay in the summer and fall. Juvenile sandbar sharks are common to abundant in the Bay during this time of year. In fact, the Bay is one of the most important nursery areas on the East Coast for young sandbar sharks.

But don't worry about a sandbar shark attack—the species typically preys on bottom fishes, other sharks, rays and invertebrates. The Bay's blue crabs are a particular favorite of the sandbar shark.

Bull shark



(Photo courtesy of Rafael de la Parra/iNaturalist CC BY-NC)

The [bull shark](https://www.chesapeakebay.net/discover/field-guide/entry/bull_shark) (https://www.chesapeakebay.net/discover/field-guide/entry/bull_shark) is a close cousin of the sandbar shark, but is more aggressive. It's an occasional summer visitor to the Chesapeake Bay,

reaching as far north as the Patuxent River. It feeds on bony fishes, rays and other sharks (particularly juvenile sandbar sharks), in addition to crustaceans, turtles and mammals.

Many shark attacks have been attributed to bull sharks, since their behavioral habits bring them in close proximity to humans. While bull sharks are considered to be one of the three most dangerous shark species, they are not a significant threat to human safety in the Chesapeake Bay.

Sand tiger shark



(Photo courtesy of Michal/iNaturalist CC BY-NC)

The sand tiger shark is a common visitor to the lower Bay during the summer and fall. It is most often found along the Bay's bottom and is active at night. It feeds mostly on small fishes, squids and other sharks, such as the sandbar shark. The sand tiger looks dangerous because of its size (up to 10 feet long!) and jagged teeth, but there have been no recorded attacks on humans.

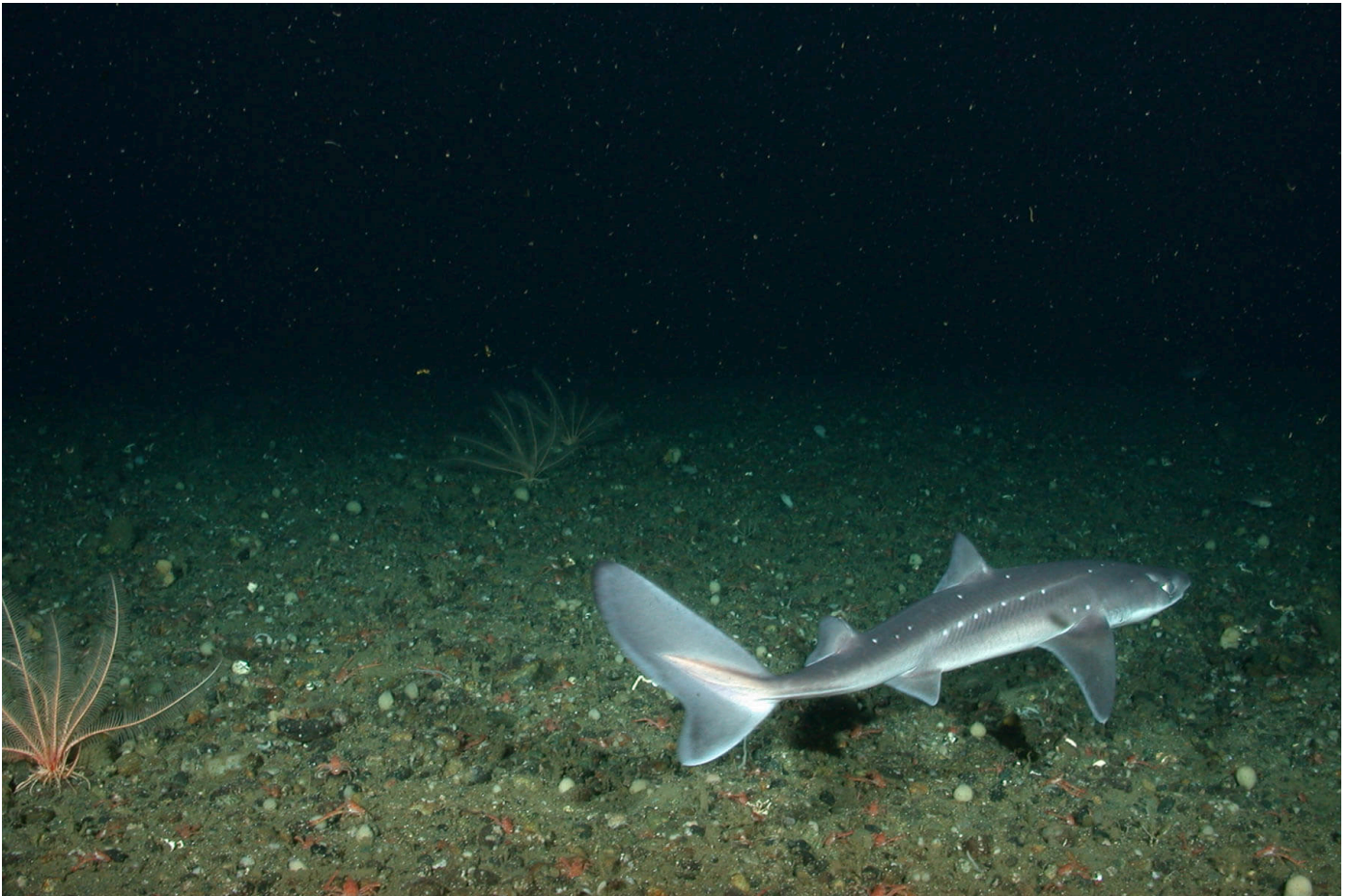
Smooth dogfish



(Photo courtesy of pcolarus/iNaturalist CC BY-NC)

The smooth dogfish is a common to abundant visitor to the Chesapeake Bay in the summer and fall. The smooth dogfish is only found in coastal areas of the western Atlantic, from Massachusetts to Venezuela and then from southern Brazil to Argentina. It is especially common in the lower Bay, as far north as the Patuxent River, in waters less than 60 feet deep. It is an active swimmer and feeds on large crustaceans and crabs at the Bay's bottom. Smooth dogfish usually travel in schools or packs.

Spiny dogfish



(Photo courtesy of NOAA)

The spiny dogfish is commonly found in the lower Bay south of the Potomac River in late fall through early spring. Like the smooth dogfish, it often travels in schools, but it is a much slower swimmer and inhabits deeper waters. The spiny dogfish is found in temperate coastal waters of all seas and oceans in the world.

Occasional to infrequent visitors to the Bay

Basking shark



The basking shark is more commonly seen along ocean coastlines. (Photo courtesy of Green Fire Productions/iNaturalist CC BY)

The basking shark is an early spring visitor to the Chesapeake Bay. The shark is often observed swimming and feeding at the water's surface and will occasionally venture from its normal coastal habitat into large bays like the Chesapeake. Most of these sightings are reported as being of one to three individuals, although there have been reports of hundreds of them at once.

Bonnethead

The bonnethead is an occasional summer visitor to the lower Chesapeake Bay. It mostly inhabits waters that are between 30-80 feet deep. Bonnetheads are more common in southern waters and often seen in groups of dozens, but are less common in the Chesapeake.

Smooth hammerhead

The smooth hammerhead is an uncommon visitor to the lower Bay during the summer or fall visitor. It's been found as far north as the mouth of the Choptank River.

Atlantic angel shark

The Atlantic angel shark is another summer and fall visitor in the lower Bay that is very rarely found farther north in the Bay. As an ambush predators, they feed primarily on bottom dwelling crabs, shrimps, squids and fishes.

Infrequent and rare visitors

Scalloped hammerhead



The scalloped hammerhead is an endangered species with only a few records from the mouth of the Chesapeake. (Photo courtesy of Albert Kang/iNaturalist CC BY-NC)

The scalloped hammerhead rarely enters the Bay at all, but there have been a few records of it at the mouth. Spotting a hammerhead would be quite an experience; they are not only a larger shark but are also endangered.

Atlantic sharpnose

The Atlantic sharpnose is a rare visitor to the lower Bay only. As a smaller shark (only 4 feet on average) it's often caught by anglers fishing along the coast, from Virginia to Texas.

Dusky shark

The dusky shark used to be fairly common in the Chesapeake, but is now just an infrequent visitor to the lower Bay in the summer months. Their range includes the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans.

How climate change impacts shark range

The water in the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers are warmer than in past decades, making the area less suitable for some species and more suitable for others. Sharks sightings may become more common as temperatures continue to rise. This could impact the Bay's ecosystem since sharks feed on species like blue crabs and other fish.

About the author