

Do Sharks Give Hickies?

plus:
Sizable scorpion,
Loony tunicates,
Foiling flukes,
and Dogging
the issue



BY DR. BOB SHIPP

Living up to their name,
Scorpionfish carry venom in
their spiny fins.



ing the mating season? I've noticed many other specimens with similar injuries. —
Capt. Mark The Shark, Miami, Florida

A: Sharks do get pretty aggressive sometimes during mating; their courtship behavior can become truly violent. Unfortunately there's not much known about mating of the large species like hammerheads, although rough-and-tumble behavior has been observed among the white and gray reef sharks. Usually scars appear on the pectoral fins and back, especially of females — although female sharks, generally larger than males, can sometimes counter pretty effectively. I would guess that such bite injuries could also occur during an active feeding event. Certainly with blue sharks, incidental cannibalism is well documented during frenzies.

As an aside, I'd like to urge shark fishermen to consider tagging and releasing truly large sharks when possible. With stocks still in a recovery mode, this would help speed things along.

Q: I caught this fish in 300 feet of water at Push Button Hill off Stuart, Florida, on a live menhaden. It had a hard, bony head and some spiny projections around its gill covers. Can you please tell me what kind of fish it is?
— *Glenn Mastrangelo, Jupiter, Florida*

A: It's definitely one of the scorpionfishes; that's easy to tell from the good photo. The fact that about 50 species occur in your neighborhood makes precise identification difficult. Since very few species reach the size of your lunker, I'd say it's most likely the spinycheek scorpionfish, *Neomerinthe hemingwayi*. These fellows often reach at least 16 inches, and your fish's col-

Q: While fishing off Miami Beach, one of my clients caught an 11-foot great hammerhead shark (approximately 450 pounds). I noticed that the tail fin appeared to have been bitten — possibly by another shark. Do sharks commonly bite each other dur-

oration — especially the spotting — fits the spinycheek's description. Be aware that scorpionfish spines contain a powerful venom that can be exceedingly painful. These fish have family ties to the stonefish of Great Barrier Reef fame and found widely elsewhere, their spines containing some of the most toxic venom of any fish, and also to the rockfishes (*Sebastes*) found so abundantly off the Pacific Coast from Baja to Alaska.

Q: While fishing the narrow mangrove channels of Bahia Magdalena, Baja California Sur, Mexico, my sinking fly line and Clouser snagged something on bottom (about 6 feet deep). It was a branch or root, encrusted with transparent lobes of a firm, jelly-like substance. Each lobe was about an inch long, as thick as your thumb and rounded off at the end. They covered the branch and contained small creatures that looked like embryonic fish. A biologist friend says the blobs might be tunicates, and the little creatures could be commensal fish along for the ride. Do you have any idea what these things are? — *Gene Kira, Valley Center, California*



A: Your biologist friend is basically correct. You snagged an entire ecosystem, with probably scores of species represented. Tunicates are strange, usually colonial creatures that resemble slick rubber or hard jelly, just as you describe. Other life forms clinging the branch represent very diverse groups ranging from sponges to any number of shell-bearing critters. The fish you saw are most likely tiny gobies or blennies (probably both), but I wouldn't go so far as to say they're commensal, which implies an al-



Return of the Blob:
Strange-looking tunicate
are among the myriad
life forms clinging to
this branch.