

CHAPTER XII

Striped Mullet, Sharks, Bird Life



MULLET LEAPING APPARENTLY DEVOID OF OBJECT.

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STRIPED MULLET—SHARKS—BIRD LIFE

STRIPED MULLET (*Mugil cephalus*)

THE adventitious interest that attaches to this active fish is that to it we owe all our tarpon, for the tarpon baits are cut from its white stomach, four from each fish. It seems identical with the British grey mullet, a similar slimy fish which feeds by a kind of suction among the sea herbage. There is, however, this difference that the Florida mullet is for ever jumping on all sides of your boat in shallow water, and is surrounded by many enemies, whereas the grey mullet at home has, at any rate in the grown-up stage, few enemies beyond man, whom it is generally able to elude. The same fish in Florida seas has so many foes, and is bait for so many monsters, that the wonder is it survives in such quantities.

During the tarpon season the one family of fishermen at

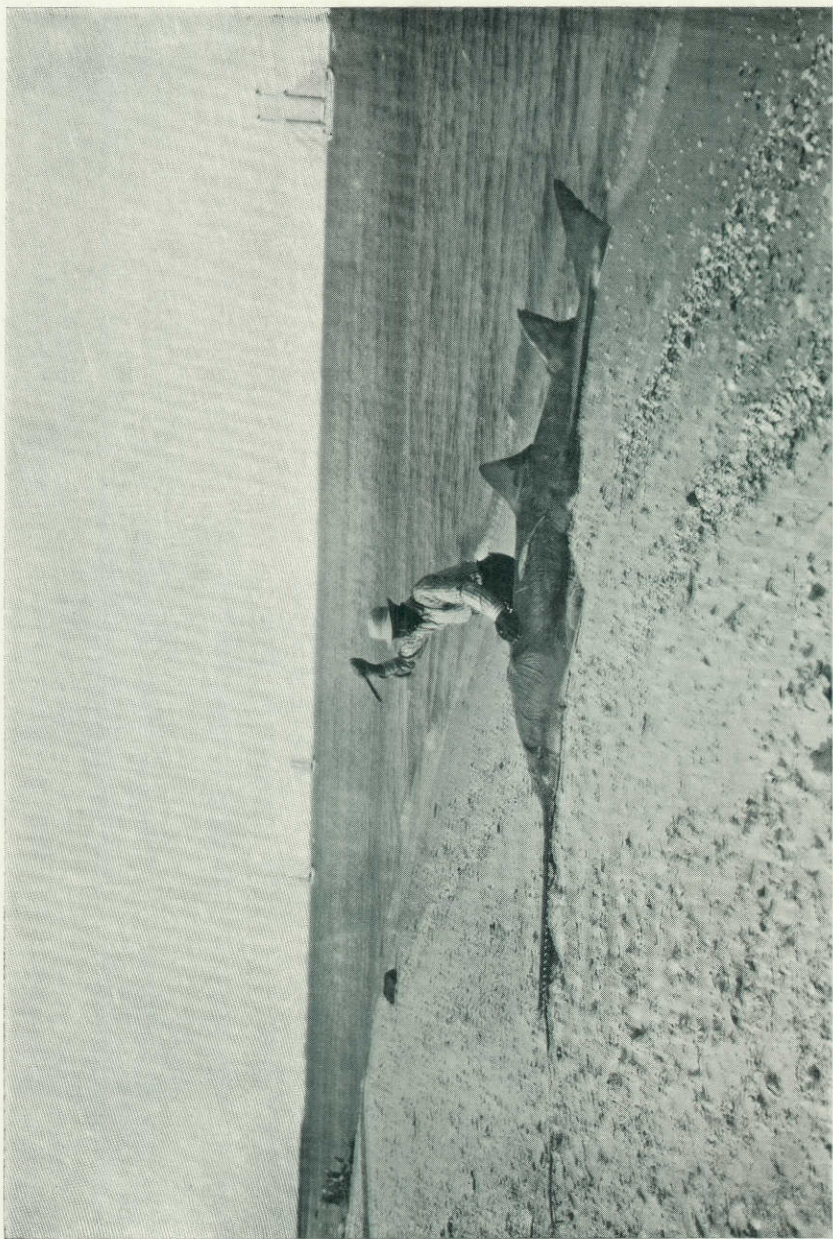
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Boca Grand are fully occupied in procuring sufficient mullet to provide bait for the anglers. Thirty fishers would require about 150 mullet a day. It is, therefore, scarcely surprising to hear that mullet are seriously decreasing in numbers. I very much doubt whether several other fish would not produce equally killing baits. I can answer for the moon fish and its allies, also the devil-fish and rays in general, whose milky-white under sides were tried with success.

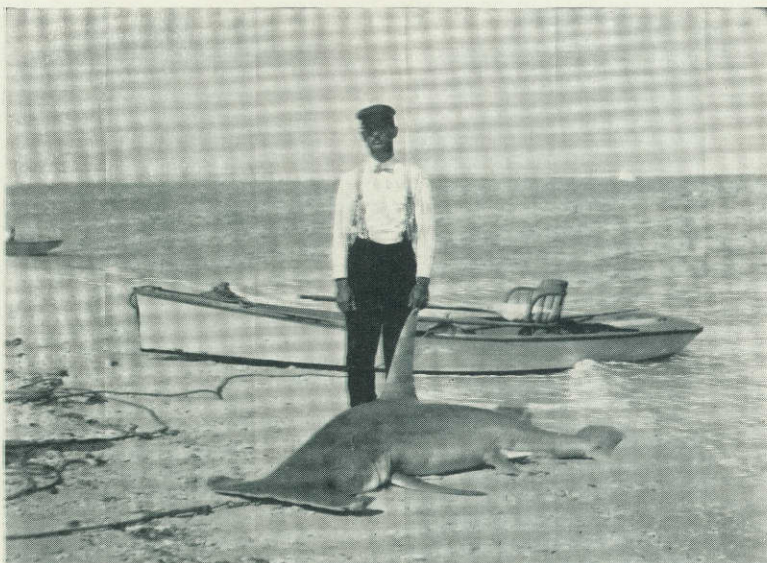
SHARKS AND SHARK-FISHING

I conclude this little book with a few notes on sharks and on bird life on that coast. Shark-fishing can now and then be very good fun, although the fish are vermin. After all, we do not eat tarpon, and the saw of the sawfish makes as good a trophy as the scale of the great herring. I am not, of course, for one moment comparing the one fish or fishing with the other, but on days when it is too rough to get afloat, or when the tide does not serve, it is better to catch great sharks from the beach or pier than to loaf on shore doing nothing.

Having named the sawfish (*Pristis pectinatus*), I will start off with the picture of a fine specimen, measuring 18 feet, which was taken on a night-line set for sharks. It moves slowly and prowls on the bottom, close in shore, for food. A sucking fish was still adhering to this one when caught. For all its shark-like appearance, the sawfish is in reality one of that kindred group, the rays, of which some pictures have already



A CAPTURED SAWFISH TO WHICH A PERSISTENT SUCKER STILL CLINGS.



A HAMMERHEAD SHARK. A SAVAGE AND REPULSIVE FISH.



THIS SHARK SEIZED ANOTHER ALREADY HOOKED AND WAS ITSELF CAUGHT.

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been given. It must, of course, be distinguished from the swordfish, which is more closely allied to the mackerel, and which has a long pointed weapon without teeth on its edges.

Any one wishing to catch a sawfish on the rod must seek such weird game in the isolated deep holes in the lagoons and shallows. The average depth will not be more than three or four feet, but every now and then the lead will go down into a much deeper hole, and there lie the sawfish. A well-known American angler caught one weighing 700 lb. in this way. The chief food of the sawfish is said to consist of horseshoe crabs, but it also in all probability slashes round with its great saw and stuns sufficient fish for a meal. I have seen young sawfish out there with the scales of smaller fish impaled on the teeth of their saws. Evidently these teeth must grow blunt with age, for piercing a fish scale is a feat that would certainly be beyond the saw-teeth in all the larger specimens that have come under my notice.

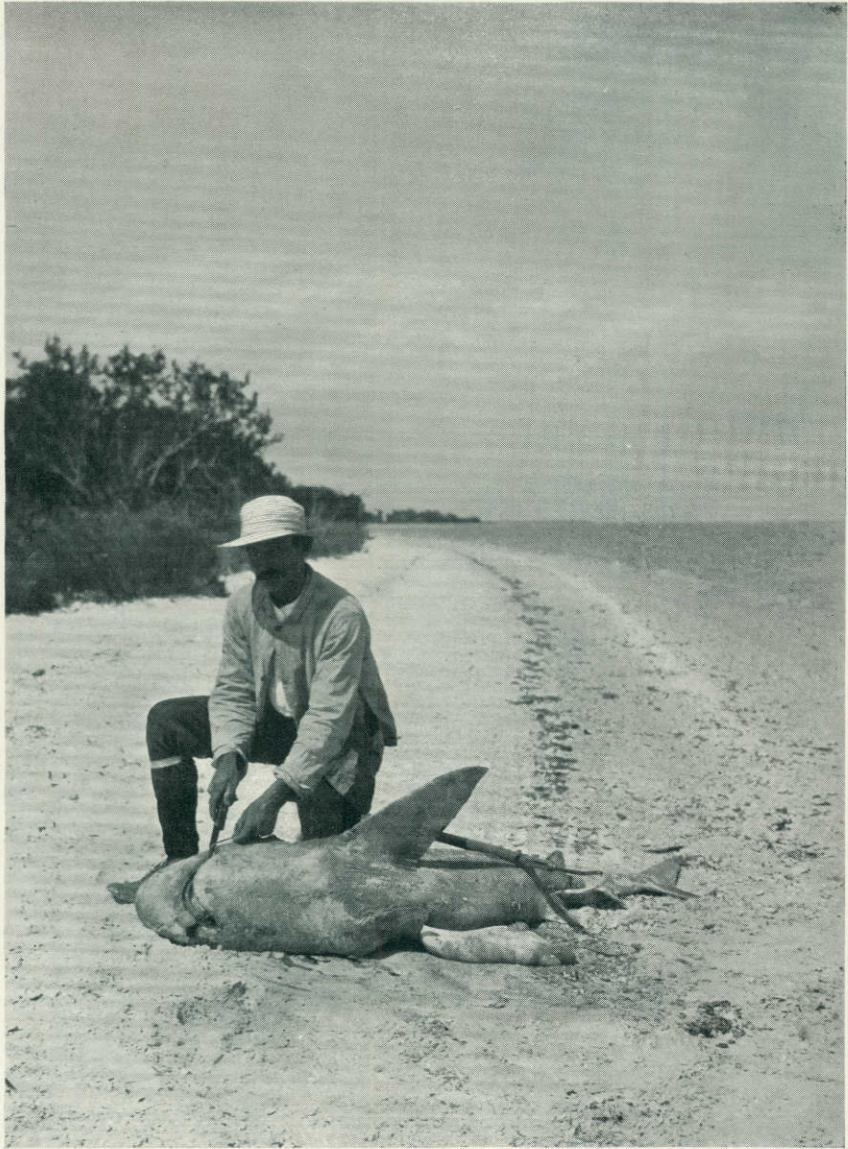
On an earlier page I have given the portrait of a baby hammerhead shark, drawing the reader's attention to the fact that the "hammer" was not yet developed. This difference in two stages of growth may be appreciated by a comparison with the subject of the accompanying photograph, in which the curious hammer, with an eye at either end, is plainly seen. The hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna zygaena*) is a voracious species, yet when swimming after a ship it has all the graceful, undulating movement of the family.

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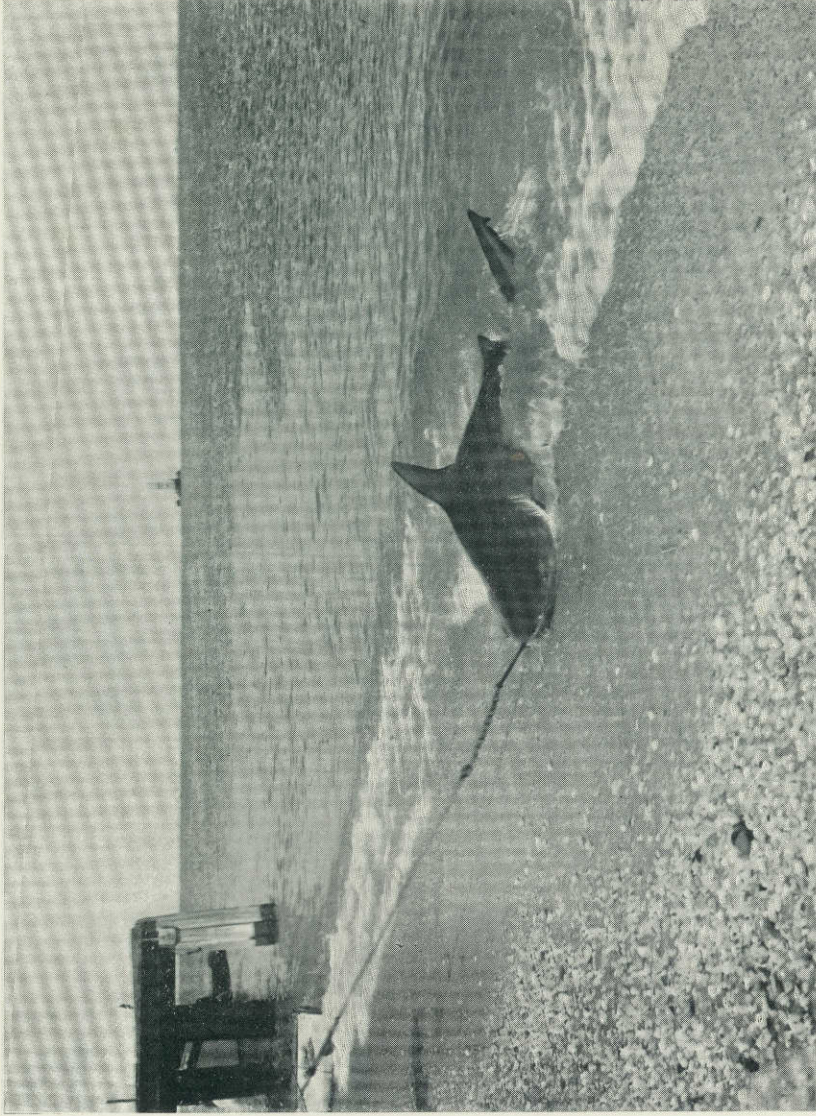
I do not profess to know these vermin severally by name, but two or three pictures of some that were captured during my stay may be of interest. The subject of the first was, like most of the tribe, a cannibal, for it took another shark (though I do not know that it was of the same species) that had been hooked, and the two were secured by the coloured "gentleman" in the picture.

This incident of its swallowing a fish already hooked reminds me of another. An angler had to return to England rather suddenly, but he was anxious to complete his catch of 100 tarpon for the season. He had already caught 99, and but half an hour remained before his boat left. He hooked the hundredth, luckily enough, but it was promptly seized by a shark, and it still looked as if his century would not be completed, when he very cleverly landed shark and all, with a few minutes to spare, and thus made up his total of tarpon.

The end of May is the time when sharks most plague the tarpon fisher, and is consequently the time for shark fishing. The best way is to bait a large hook with a whole split fish made fast to a long stout line. Then you fling this well out from the Lighthouse Jetty, leave a good coil of slack, and make the end fast. Before very long, the slack line begins to creep out, then rushes, and you must, if the shark is a large one, call all the help you can muster, for the fight will be a good one. All hands play him from the beach, and, with a little give and take, he generally comes in with a run, a nasty-looking brute perhaps



EXTRACTING A FIRMLY EMBEDDED HOOK FROM A SHARK.



ALL HANDS GIVE THE SHARK A MIGHTY HEAVE ASHORE.

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fifteen feet long. If you catch a great leopard shark, or man-eater (*Carcharodon carcharias*), the white belly of which is seen in the photograph facing the following page, it may be worth while ripping him up to see whether there are any boots within, or perchance even more personal signs of human occupation. In one of these a sea-lion weighing 100 lb. was once found on the California coast, but you will be far more likely to come across a quantity of horseshoe crabs.

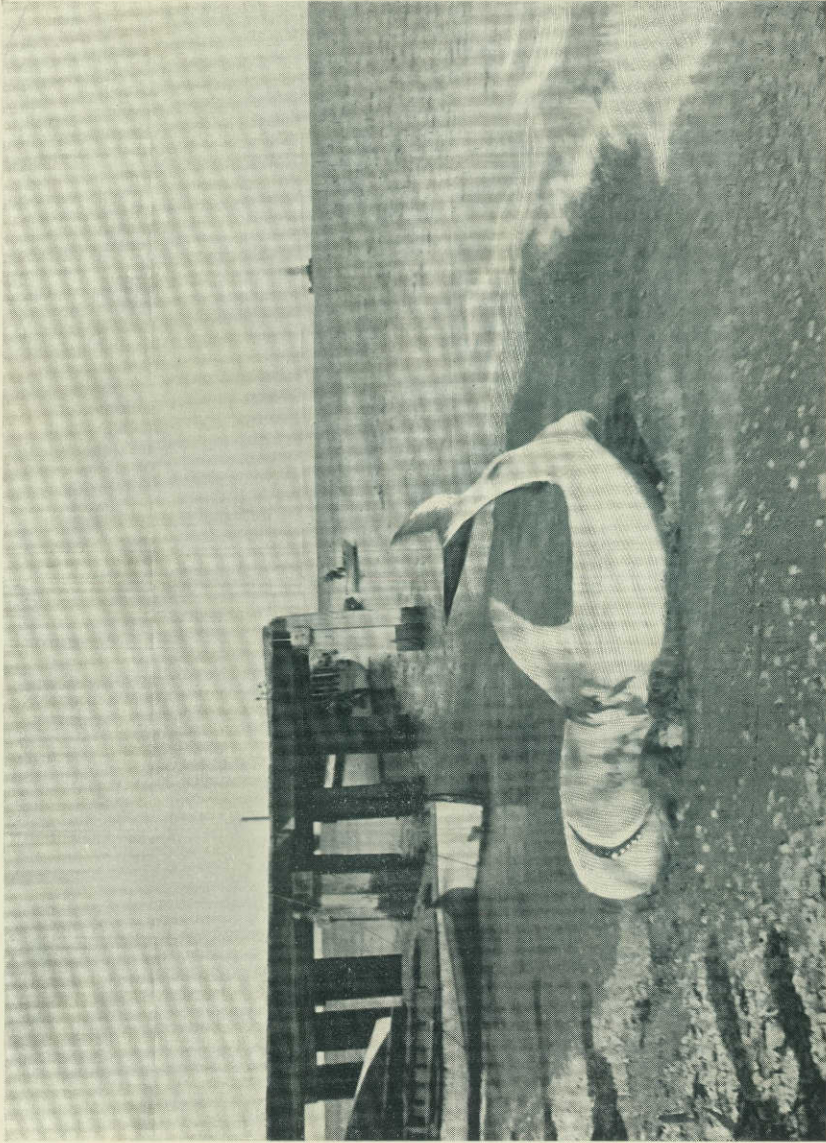
From this last shark figured we took three or four young ones, quite ready to swim away if they had been given the chance. They were not, for it is no part of humaneness to spare sharks.

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BIRD LIFE.

The bird life of Boca Grand is not sufficiently studied by those who spend their holiday there, so intent is everyone on fishing. Yet it is most interesting, what the plume hunters have left of it. America is the great land of waste as well as of production, and the egrets and other beautiful fowl are surely following the bison. On fine, still days, when there is great splashing of carangoid and other fish, the pelicans are soon astir, dashing into the shoals and putting them to rout with heavy loss. Then, too, may be seen the little kittiwake gulls settling unmolested on the heads and backs of the great birds, and always expectant of the scanty leavings that they never seem to get.

Pelicans are nowadays so scarce at Boca Grand that any small peculiarity is certain to be noticed whenever one puts in an appearance. I recollect one coming along one day with his pouch slit from side to side and hanging loose. What dreadful battle had given him such a gash could only be guessed, but he seemed to grow thinner and tamer and more hungry every day, for every fish that he caught forthwith dropped out through the gap. At length, however, he seemed to rise to the occasion, and as soon as he caught a fish, he would clap his beak close to his breast and coax his victim down his throat. The process was slow, but sure, and in a few weeks this pelican was well



LEOPARD SHARK.

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and strong again, and the gap in his pouch had to all appearance healed.

There is an island just off the coast measuring scarce one hundred yards in any direction, and thereon stands a pelicans' rookery. There these great confiding, prehistoric-looking, silly birds used to gather until they were all but shot out by plume-hunters at 25 cents. the skin. And here, in the highest trees, some of the great birds still congregate, their curious webbed feet looking most incongruous as they grasp the swaying branches. The neighbouring island, somewhat larger in extent, is the home of innumerable cormorants and herons, both blue and white, all nesting in the tall black mangroves, and so tame that you may approach to within six yards of the little blue herons. Yet on all sides are the tiny corpses of deserted little birds, their parents in the breeding plumage ruthlessly shot down to deck women's hats! The thin end of the wedge of bird protection has, it is true, been inserted, but the law is almost inoperative in these out-of-the-way regions, and the slaughter proceeds unchecked. And so the beautiful American woodlands are being denuded of their unrivalled bird life in order that every mistress and every maid may dangle "osprey" plumes over their heads.

With my pictures, then, end my notes, and I am only too conscious of their meagreness. My object, however, was, as I may have said already, to put before intending visitors to

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Florida—and tarpon fishing must gain a wider public before long—some of the chief fish that they are likely to meet with in those waters.

Two curious facts that I find in my diaries seem worth setting down in conclusion. One is that dogs cannot live long in that climate. They succumb within four years to a disease that has hitherto been a complete mystery. A local doctor has, however, isolated the microbe responsible for the mischief.

My other hint is for the smoker. I find that a local cigar epicure always made a practice of storing his weeds in the refrigerator, in order to keep them in condition, for it is more difficult to keep cigars green than in a perfectly matured state.

THE END.