

Basking Shark

Scientific Name: *Cetorhinus maximus* **Irish Name:** Liamhán gréine



The Basking Shark's large mouth is white inside and its gill slits are black.

Basking Sharks are the second biggest fish in the world, the Whale Shark being the biggest. They are found in all the world's temperate oceans—north and south of the equator. Unfortunately, not a lot is known about them.

We are very privileged to have these gentle giants living in our waters. In the summer months, they are usually seen feeding on plankton on the surface of the water, they can also be seen “basking” or “sunning” themselves, which gives rise to their name. While they usually spend about two months in one area and then move on, they are believed to move to deeper water in winter, beyond the continental shelf.

In general, Basking Sharks are no danger to humans but they are large

animals so care should always be taken around them. If out in a boat and a Basking Shark is nearby, the boat should keep a safe distance for both the fish and the boat's safety.

The life expectancy of the Basking Shark is around 50 years. Females give birth to live young and give birth to a few large babies each breeding cycle. Each young shark is about 1.5 m long when born. Before giving birth, females carry their young for at least 3 years!

Average adults are 7.9 m long but some can reach 11 metres. They have a long body covered rough skin and are greyish/brown in colour with a lighter underside. They have a conical snout, a big mouth and large gill slits around the head. On their back is a large, floppy dorsal fin, along with pectoral fins on their sides and a crescent-shaped tail fin. Other smaller fins run along the back and underneath.

Basking Sharks are a filter feeding shark species. They have a very large mouth, with hundreds of small teeth. While slowly swimming, the mouth is opened very wide, allowing a continuous flow of water flows through. Large gills around the head contain bristle-like gill rakers, which are covered in mucus, and these filter the plankton out of the water. These sharks can filter about 2 million litres of water per hour.



A Basking Shark swimming at the surface. Note the floppy dorsal fin and large tail fin.

Basking Sharks have a very large liver, taking up 25% of their body. This is used for buoyancy. Though they usually move slowly through the water, they are sometimes seen leaping out of water. It is thought this may be to get rid of parasites on their skin.

Basking Sharks have few predators. In the past they were easily hunted by humans for their liver oils, skin and meat. Thankfully, today Basking Sharks are protected.

FACT SHEET

Colour: Brownish or greyish, with a lighter underside.

Length: The average adult is 7.9 m long

Weight: On average 5,200 kg

Habitat: Oceanic waters.

Diet: Plankton

Zooplankton



The main food that Basking Sharks feed on are zooplankton. These are microscope animals and animal larvae that live in the sea. Read more about zooplankton on page 4.