

N.Y. Beaches Step Up Shark Patrols, Adding Drones, Trackers and Tourniquets

Amid an increase in shark sightings, lifeguards are increasing patrols and adopting new strategies, but marine experts say “the danger to people is infinitesimal.”



By Corey Kilgannon

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LIDO BEACH, N.Y. — It was a classic early summer Friday at Point Lookout Beach on Long Island, with beachgoers frolicking in the frothy waves and basking under the sunny skies.

But farther out, just beyond the swimmers, was a more urgent scene: a lifeguard on a Jet Ski circling continuously while Nassau County police officers surveyed the waters by boat and helicopter.

It was an example of the stepped-up shark patrols along the more than 100 miles of Long Island’s beaches that have followed a sharp uptick in sightings last summer.

“It’s become part of our daily routine,” said a lifeguard supervisor, Justine Anderson, of the shark patrols her Town of Hempstead lifeguards have begun this summer. “We’ll patrol throughout the day and respond immediately if we get a report of a shark sighting.”

In the past, Ms. Anderson said, shark sightings had been exceedingly rare. But last summer brought daily instances of sharks feeding on bait fish alarmingly close to swimmers, necessitating temporary closings of swimming areas along Long Island’s oceanfront.



Johnny Milano for The New York Times

So far this summer, a 10-foot mako shark washed up at Point Lookout over Memorial Day weekend, prompting another round of shark headlines. And just this week, the authorities said a man swimming at Jones Beach may have been bitten by a shark.

Lifeguards who work summers on Long Island beaches have traditionally been expected simply to keep an eye out for the occasional dorsal fin and assess the validity of reports from jittery beachgoers who swear they just saw the second coming of “Jaws.”

But now, lifesaving departments on Long Island — which are at the same time facing staffing issues among a national lifeguard shortage — are taking the shark situation more seriously.

On Friday, the Nassau County executive, Bruce Blakeman, held a news conference at nearby Nickerson Beach to announce that the county police would be increasing patrols this summer, both by boat and by helicopter, to do hourly runs over the shoreline.

Numerous other departments across Long Island have also begun adopting new shark-monitoring strategies and expanded their lifesaving tools to include drones, Jet Skis and paddleboards, as well as online shark tracking. Local police departments are also now tasked with shark patrol by boat and helicopter.

At Jones Beach and Robert Moses State Park, nearly 20 lifeguards, park police and other beach staff members have recently been trained to operate a fleet of seven drones as part of a new aerial shark-monitoring program.

“It’s like a new world we’re living in,” said Cary Epstein, a veteran guard at Jones Beach, which, along with Robert Moses State Park, employs about 375 lifeguards. “In my 25 years as a lifeguard, we never had to do this.”



Numerous lifesaving departments have added jet skis for shark patrols. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

“This isn’t ‘Jaws,’ we’re not talking about a great white, man-eating machine — but if a thresher shark comes through and takes a nibble on your foot, that could be a problem,” said Mr. Epstein.

A new drone unit at Jones Beach is following Mr. Epstein's lead; he began monitoring the waters last summer with his own personal drone after a fellow guard was gashed in the leg while swimming, presumably by a shark. A day later, swimming was suspended because of a shark sighting.

"We're definitely on alert and doing our due diligence," Mr. Epstein said, noting that they were "not searching for sharks unnecessarily."

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Town of Hempstead beaches hired additional lifeguards this summer to watch out for sharks and have mobilized a shark patrol on Jet Skis, as well as a drone squad. In addition to water rescue techniques and C.P.R., the town's ocean guards are also trained to differentiate between shark species, to identify ones that are more dangerous to swimmers.

Lifeguards at nearby Long Beach, which closed swimming areas more than a dozen times last summer because of shark reports, have invested in three Jet Skis to assist with shark patrols.

Farther east, Smith Point beach lifeguards conduct morning shark patrols on Jet Skis and paddleboards, beach officials said. They have also begun stocking tourniquets in their first aid kits in case of shark attacks.

And in East Hampton, lifeguards are using an online shark tracker to keep an eye out for the return of large ones like Mary Lee, a 4,000-pound, 17-foot-long great white that is tagged with a tracking device.

Of course, the mere mention of sharks and summer beaches frustrates marine experts who say the animals pose no real increased danger to swimmers.

Attacks are extremely rare locally and many experts say shark patrols do little but fuel unwarranted terror of sharks.

Hans Walters, a field scientist with the Wildlife Conservation Society's New York Aquarium who has spent over a decade studying sharks in New York waters, said the latest hype over sharks near the beaches was "very overblown."

The threat to people from sharks is practically nonexistent, he said, and there is no real evidence that local shark populations have increased in recent years.

“The danger to people is infinitesimal,” he said.

There have been perhaps only a dozen documented shark attacks in New York waters going back centuries, he said, and most of those were more likely accidental collisions resulting in a gash, rather than a shark actively biting a swimmer.

Swimmers should be assured, Mr. Walter said, that sharks are not interested in them.

“If anyone’s been in the ocean, they’ve already swum with sharks,” he said. “They just don’t know it.”

The main reasons for more sightings, according to Mr. Walters, are an increase in monitoring and an uptick in the sharing of civilian phone and drone pictures, which spread widely on social media and inevitably make headlines.

“These sharks are not looking for people,” he said. “They’ve been prowling the ocean for millions of years and there are no more sharks here this year, or last year, or the year before that. We’re just looking for them more.”

Nevertheless, facing heightened concerns from the public, many beach operators are seeking to assure beachgoers that they are watching out for them.

“When the mako washed ashore, that spurred concerns from residents,” said the Hempstead town supervisor, Don Clavin. “So we wanted them to rest assured our people are out there taking all these precautions, that everything’s being monitored and we’re going above and beyond.”

In Long Beach, there are regular sightings of spinner sharks feeding on bait fish offshore, said the lifeguard chief, Paul Gillespie.

But while he dismissed much of the fuss over sharks as media and political hype, he added: “You can’t poo-poo it either, so we always investigate every report by getting the jet skis in the water and looking up and down the shoreline.”

At Town of East Hampton beaches, sharks feeding on bait several hundred yards out are tolerated, but if they get much closer than 200 yards from the shore, swimming is curtailed, said John Ryan Jr., the town’s lifeguard chief.

“They’re feeding on bait — they’re not cruising the shorelines look for people,” he said. “But if you don’t do anything and then something happens, that’s a problem.”

Chris Stefanou, 26, a Long Island fisherman who participates in a federal shark-tagging program monitoring shark migration, said he had seen more sharks in local waters every year as water temperatures had increased.



Nassau County police officers are also patrolling the waters for sharks. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

There is a growing presence of hammerheads and bull sharks locally, which have previously avoided the colder local waters, according to Mr. Stefanou, who said he had caught nearly 1,000 sharks — up to 14 feet long — while surf-casting from local beaches over the past nine years. (He shows off his catches on Instagram.)

“There are more and more sharks in the water, which sounds scary,” he said. “But it’s actually a good thing because it reflects a healthy ecosystem.”