

SARDINE RUN

A dazzling wild life extravaganza

By Martin Totland
Images by Fiona Ayerst



Every once in a blue moon we get to experience natural phenomena that attune us to how intricate, delicate and genuinely awe-inspiring the web of nature is. Martin Totland relays his encounter of the greatest natural event of South African oceans: the Sardine Run.

The Sardine Run is an annual migration along the east coast of South Africa that originates in the cool waters of the Agulhas Bank. Billions of sardines spawn around May and begin their migration northward, which lasts through June and July. Generally, this migration creates a feeding frenzy and drags in droves of predators that follow and feed on the sardines.

Every year, adventurous people set out to witness and hopefully catch some stunning imagery of this natural spectacle. In June 2012, a few other interns at Fiona Ayerst Underwater Photography (FAUP) and I voyaged to East London with hopeful yet realistic expectations, knowing full well that there are never any guarantees when it comes to the wild. We had heard, however, that there had been sightings further up

along the coast and that we were on track to potentially get very lucky.

Accompanying us in East London was Mark Addison, a South African marine wildlife expert and shark diving pioneer. Addison has spent the last 15 years monitoring and following the Sardine Run, and is rightly considered a pioneer in tracking it. Addison has been utilising the technique of following predatory action as a way to locate sardine shoals for over a decade.

Our first day out on the sea was unfortunately in accordance with the sober reminders we had been given: we did not find any sardine shoals despite hours of cruising the waves and diligently scanning the horizon for gannets. Gannets, the big white birds easily visible from a distance, are a good way of finding schools

of fish because they will generally congregate in giant flocks of hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of individuals that plunge-dive into the water, hunting for sardines and anchovies.

We vigilantly perused the heavens, squinting at the distance, hoping to see anything resembling a flock of birds. Besides looking for gannets, it's a good idea to keep your eyes peeled for large pods of common dolphins and even whales. The reason for

this is the aforementioned feeding frenzy. According to Addison (whom I'm inclined to trust), the Sardine Run constitutes the second biggest influx of nutrients to South African waters, only surpassed by the rainfall. Some experts have speculated that the Sardine Run might rival the wildebeest migration in terms of sheer biomass.

The vastness of the blue ocean and the hours of scouting were occasionally interrupted by humpback and Bryde's whales breaching and the odd dolphin here and there. For South Africans accustomed to seeing whales on a regular basis this might not seem like anything to cheer for. But the majority of the interns were American and most were entirely new to whale watching.

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Another two days went by; hours of scouting periodically interrupted by whales and dolphins, and a few quick chases to look for rumoured schools of fish, or bait balls as they're known. The two boats, or RIBs (rigid inflatable boats), that we darted around in were in periodical radio contact with other vessels along the coast, sharing information about sightings and possible locations of activity.

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On our third day at sea we spotted some large pods of dolphins which were a good sign; we knew that dolphins and large flocks of gannets are a good combination. Our skipper, Marcus, deftly manoeuvred our boat around a large pod of dolphins and brought us ahead of their trajectory.

You often hear about the remarkable intelligence of dolphins, but being able to witness their playful friendliness and curiosity up close is something else entirely. As we were hovering on the surface, the dolphins got right in our faces for a second or two to inspect these strangers, now in their element, before swimming away and rejoining their pod. These encounters, in and of themselves, and the photographs we took, made the Sardine Run worth it for me.

Our fourth and penultimate day started off like the others: high expectations and high spirits with a subconscious awareness that there were no guarantees. We were cruising westward when our skipper, Marcus, received word from Addison on the other boat that there was promising predatory activity twenty-something kilometres eastward. Marcus turned our boat around and gunned it towards the other boat's location.

Upon converging with Addison and some Oceans Research interns, we saw the biggest pod of dolphins yet coming our way and hundreds, if not thousands, of gannets in the air, plunging maniacally. We could easily see that the gannets were emerging from the water with small, silvery fish hanging from their beaks. At this moment, everyone had the same thought as we all immediately started donning our scuba gear, preparing to enter the frenzied water.

As soon as I submerged beneath the big blue, I witnessed one of the most spectacular things I have ever seen in my life: a bait ball the size of a school bus getting assaulted from all angles by dusky sharks, copper sharks, other smaller fish and gannets.

Allow me to paint a clearer picture: beneath us scores upon scores of sharks were ominously circling in the deep blue nothingness, getting ever closer to the bait ball – and us. In front of us the bait ball, contained in a semi-spherical shape by the unrelenting onslaught of predators, moved unpredictably back and forth. You couldn't hear anything except the whooshing and wheezing of your regulator and you were, in a sense, entirely in your own head.

It's a sobering and thought-provoking experience; you can't see the ocean floor and there is nothing in the distance that reminds you of your everyday on-land existence. You are a fish out of water, as it were. All your senses seem heightened as you pay attention to your own proximity to the sharks and take in the beauty of nature in all its complex glory. This display of nature was simultaneously humbling and frightening. I say this

because this sight instilled in me a sense of how interdependent, fragile and complex the web of nature is as well as a crystalline understanding of how unforgiving and uncaring it can be.

At one stage, we were free to get as close as we liked to the bait ball, with some of us even swimming directly into it and engulfing ourselves in fish. Allowing ourselves this proximity to the action was immensely exciting and enjoyable. It was a perfect end to a day at sea and an extremely lucky and rewarding culmination of a week of hard work and high expectations.

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AT A *glance*

Frequency:	The Sardine Run occurs annually.
Time of year:	Around June and July.
Reason:	Sardines prefer water temperatures of 20°C and migrate to extend their habitat in the cooler winter waters.
Start point:	Agulhas Bank (between East London and Port Elizabeth).
End point:	Durban.
Predators:	Dolphins, sharks, whales, seals, penguins, orcas and even Cape gannets converge on the Wild Coast to gorge on the millions of sardines.
Bait ball:	The predators break off a ball of sardines from the group in order to catch them more easily. This ball is called a bait ball.
NSB and shark nets:	Each year the Natal Shark Board tracks the progress of the sardines and raises the shark nets along the coast to allow the predators to follow the run unhindered.

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