

## Recent sightings of whale shark in Singapore waters

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**Subjects:** Whale shark *Rhincodon typus* (Chondrichthyes: Orectolobiformes: Rhincodontidae).

**Subjects identified by:** Ivan Kwan, Yi Zheng Lim and Zeehan Jaafar.

**Location, date and time:** Singapore Strait at two locations –

- 1) Between St. John's Island and Lazarus Island; 7 June 2015; around 1615 hrs.
- 2) Between Bukom Island and Jurong Island; 9 August 2020; around 1400 hrs.

**Habitat:** Marine. Coastal sea in open waters.

**Observers:** Juepeng Lin (1) and Soon Lea Lim (2).

**Observations:** Two separate observations –

- 1) One example of about 4 m in total length, was observed on 7 June 2015 in the embayment between St. John's and Lazarus Islands, their link bridge, and Seringat-Kias Islands. Juepeng Lin and other observers first sighted the fish while they were on the link bridge between St John's and Lazarus Islands at around 1615 hrs. The fish was swimming alongside the bridge, just below the surface (Fig. 1). It remained in the area for more than an hour.



Fig. 1: Dorso-lateral view of whale shark off the link bridge between St. John's and Lazarus Islands on 7 June 2015. Note the rows of fine white spots on its back, and the tip of the upper lobe of its caudal fin breaking the water surface. Photograph by Juepeng Lin.

- 2) One individual, about 3-4 m in total length, was observed swimming just below the water surface, in the channel between Bukom and Jurong Islands on 9 August 2020. This shark was sighted while the observer and his friends were angling on board a leisure craft (37 x 13.6 x 3.7 ft). It was first noted when it was about 4-5 m away from the boat. The fish had approached the boat before swimming away (Fig. 2). This encounter lasted only 1-2 minutes.



Fig. 2: Whale shark (indicated by arrow) swimming just below the water surface near the boat off Bukom Island on 9 August 2020. Note the squarish head (facing left) and rows of fine white spots on its back. Photograph by Soon Lea Lim

**Remarks:** The two featured encounters are only the second and third published reports of the whale shark within the territorial waters of Singapore. The first record was of an individual of around 20 ft (about 6 m) found trapped among fishing stakes in a kelong off Pulau Sebarok. On 6 June 1964, acting upon the fishermen's requests, the shark was killed with 13 shots from the Bren gun of an officer of the Marine Police (Anonymous, 1964). The body was reported to have been handed over to the University of Singapore (now the National University of Singapore), but it is not present at that institution (personal observation). Happily, the two recent examples did not meet with such tragically violent receptions.

Based on their sizes, the two whale sharks reported here are likely to be sub-adults (see Rowat & Brooks 2012). According to the observers, both had appeared to be healthy with no signs of injury.

The whale shark is listed as 'endangered' in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Pierce & Norman, 2016). The species is circum-global in distribution and is found in both tropical and warm temperate seas (Allen and Erdmann, 2012). It is considered one of the largest fish species (Compagno 2001), and is known to be viviparous (Joung et al., 1996). Although highly charismatic, little is known of the behaviour of whale sharks. The status of scientific knowledge of their behavioural ecology was reviewed by Martins (2007).

#### **References:**

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