

MY WEEK DORIEN SCHRODER

Help! A great white shark's crash-landed among my interns

The scientist keeps her cool after the predator leaps into her research boat

THEN I HEARD A SPLASH

Working at Oceans Research in Mossel Bay, South Africa, as a marine scientist for the past six months, I have often got close to great white sharks. When we're out in the bay they can swim within a few feet of the boat and whenever I've been cage diving they've swum right beside me. But I've never come as close to one as I did last Monday.

I was on a trip with six of my interns. We had put fish oil in the water to attract sharks to the boat and were taking pictures of their dorsal fins as a means of identifying and counting them.

Great whites tend to be solitary creatures so it's funny to see them when they meet each other by the boat. Often they'll get a fright when they realise they've got company and will swim away quickly. During this trip we had two or three sharks around the boat. Then things became a little bit quieter and suddenly I heard a splash.

SCREAMING CHAOS

I recognised it as the sound of a shark coming out of the water to breach. Sharks are pretty big and they have to get up a lot of speed to get out of the water. When one breaches completely, there's a really loud splash. I turned around and there was this great white shark in mid-air. I saw it, mouth closed, right before it landed on the boat.

It had breached right next to one of my interns who luckily stepped aside just in time. I grabbed the girl by her hoodie and pulled her onto the platform on the stern of the boat. Within seconds all the other interns were standing on the platform with us. Things were chaotic, the interns were screaming and the shark started thrashing around.

I think it must have got a fright from another shark swimming underneath it and jumped out of the water without checking what was above. It was definitely not an aggressive move. It was only 10ft long and

the boat is 26ft so it would never have considered going for something so much bigger.

A PROBLEM TO SOLVE

The shark landed on the boxes that hold the fuel and the fish. Its body wasn't entirely in the boat, so for a second I thought it would fall back into the sea. Sharks can only move forward and because it was panicking that's what it did, working itself further onto the boat. The interns were talking in my ear and I couldn't concentrate so I asked them to pipe down. I knew that as long as there was noise and chaos the shark wouldn't calm down. When they went quiet, the shark did the same. I thought: the interns are all right, the boat is all right, now I just need to get the shark out of my boat. Instinct took over and I went into problem-solving mode.

The shark had worked itself into a corner at the back of the boat so I told the interns to go to the bow. Once they were there, I called my bosses, Enrico and Ryan, who have been working with great whites for many years. I thought they'd know what to do.

BRING ON THE CRANE

As I waited for them to arrive in their boat I poured buckets of water over the shark's gills so it could continue to breathe.

Every now and again I could see it trying to lift one of its fins but it was too exhausted to do more. I could tell it was suffering from a lack of oxygen. When Enrico and Ryan arrived, they decided to tie a rope around one of the shark's fins. We tried to pull it into the sea using the other boat, but because it weighed more than 1,000lb we couldn't manage. We decided to head back to port, where a crane was ready.

OUT TO SEA

The crane hoisted the shark out of the boat into the sea using the rope we had tied around the fin. As soon as the shark felt the water it started moving around again so we cut the rope and it swam away.

An hour later we got a phone call to say that it had beached in the shallow waters of the harbour. It had used so much energy and was so deprived of oxygen it didn't have the energy to find its way out to sea.

Enrico and Ryan understand shark behaviour; they knew it was safe to approach it in shallow water while it was disoriented. They got into the water with it and tied it to the boat so it could recover with water flowing through its gills. After half an hour of being pulled along, the shark started moving and when they cut the rope it swam away strongly.

We're pretty sure it's doing well although it's probably not going to visit Mossel Bay for a while.

As told to Audrey War

