

## **Battle Tactics for Thresher Shark Wars**

By: Capt. David Bacon

The unmistakable phantom-like shape of a thresher shark rising up behind a bait near boatside sent shivers up my spine. It also made me start bellowing orders like a watch officer on the quarterdeck of a frigate in line of battle.

Hungry and curious, the longtail moved quickly and furtively, dashing away and then back again. My deckhand, Tiffany, knew just what to do, whether I was bellowing orders or not. She dashed for the cabin to grab a suitable rig, while I squeezed a few live baitfish just enough to cause them to twitch and swim in a wounded fish circle after I tossed them out behind the boat. That action is a sure-fire shark attractant.

The shark stayed close by, feeding on the chum I was slowly metering out. Tiffany came out with just the right rig for a sporting battle with an angry thresher... a heavy-gauge VMS 6/0 live bait hook on 120-pound steel leader tied to the 65 pound Invisibraid main line spooled on a Penn 16VSX reel on a Penn Mariner rod. I estimated the shark to be 175 pounds. This was going to be sporting and fun!

We belly hooked a lively six-inch mackerel, dropped the baitfish in the water and let it take line out until it was about thirty feet from the boat. Then we engaged the clicker, put the reel in freespool, and set it in a rod holder. I continued metering injured chumfish. It didn't take five minutes before that reel screamed for three seconds and then went silent. That T-shark had whacked the mack with its long powerful tail.

An anxious passenger took the rod out of the holder and waited for my instructions. I told him to wait for the shark to take the fish the rest of the way into its mouth and move off again. Just as I finished speaking the reel went off again with a prolonged clicking. I let it run about fifteen yards before instructing the lad to put the reel in gear and slam that hook home hard. He did, and that surprised thresher greyhounded in the air three times in a row and raced for open water. That was an adrenaline rush moment! Forty five hard-fought minutes later we double gaffed that critter, hauled it aboard among hearty backslaps, high-fives and cameras flashing.

As thresher sharks move up the mainland of So Cal each spring, we suddenly have a major gamefish option within reach of most boaters, skiff fishers and gutsy kayakers. The SoCal Bight frequently becomes crowded with big concentrations of baitfish, which acts as a magnet for larger predators. Threshers use SoCal for a nursing and growing up area where their young can find plenty of feed and grow fast and strong. To keep this process in balance and protect the resource, we generally release shark pups under about 70 pounds when we catch them aboard my charterboat, WaveWalker. To put this in perspective, a female T-shark doesn't reproduce until she is well over 200 pounds.

Shark fishing is a fun combination of frenzied activity, great patience and ongoing bait catching work. On charters, I have one or two people constantly work bait gangions on spinning gear to catch small mackerel or smelt, which are among the best baits for these sharks. Threshers will also eat anchovies and sardines, but when we can jig up some 6 to 8 inch mackerel we have the perfect baits.

The size of the hook is determined by the type and size of the bait. With a six-inch mackerel use a 6/0 to 7/0 hook and either tail-hook or belly-hook the mackerel. With a smelt, sardine, or very large anchovy choose a 2/0 to 3/0 hook. With smaller baits, go down to size 1 or 1/0 hooks. The hook must be tough and sharp, so select a heavy-gauge hook and sharpen the point if needed.

No weight is required, unless there is considerable wind and the drift is so quick that livelined baits stay too close to the surface. In windy conditions use a sliding sinker on the main line above the leader so the bait stays at least several feet below the surface. Five to ten feet down is where I prefer a bait to soak and struggle enticingly.

A thresher may whack a bait with its tail, or just mouth the bait without any tail action. Fish with the reel in freespool but with the clicker on to alert the crew and to guard against backlashes from a savage tail-whack. Let the fish make a good run, then spin down the drag to a medium-heavy drag setting for the line strength, switch the clicker off, and slam that hook home. Now hang on tight because you just lit the fuse on a big stick of dynamite!