



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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Leopard Sharks

One of the more magical excursions in west Marin has to be a kayak trip into Drake's Estero to cavort with the **leopard sharks** (*Triakis semifasciata*) and **bat rays** (*Myliobatis californica*). A shark gliding directly under your kayak certainly gets your attention, even if it is only three feet long and of a species that has never harmed a human.

Sharks and rays are cartilaginous fish that navigate and locate their prey using bioelectrical sensors rather than sight. Leopard sharks are classic mud-sucking bottom feeders, chowing down on crabs, shrimp, octopus, small fish, inkeeper worms, bat rays, and fish eggs. Although leopard sharks can reach six feet in length, most adults here are four feet or less due to the cumulative effects of over-fishing.

Leopard sharks occur from Oregon to Baja and are one of the most common sharks in California's bays and estuaries. Drake's Estero, Bolinas Lagoon and Tomales Bay are almost sure bets to see these gorgeous creatures, if you know where and when to look. Leopard sharks can often be seen from land cruising shallow near-shore waters, especially during summer mating or spring pupping seasons.

Unlike other sharks that must swim continuously to breathe, leopard sharks can hang out in the mud and pump water through their gills with their lower jaws. Leopard sharks cruise around and feed in cliques of similarly sized sharks, foraging in shallow mud and sand flats during high tide.

Leopard sharks mate in June and July, congregating in tidal salt marshes. The following April and May females come into shallow water in estuaries to give birth to live young - usually from 4 to 29 pups. Young sharks are prey for seals and sea lions and even adult sharks can become food for large fish, including white and sevengill sharks.

Bat rays are pretty smooth themselves – not only can they “fly” underwater, but they copulate while swimming with synchronized wingbeats -- the male under the female. Bat rays can max out at 200 pounds with a six foot wingspan!

Bat rays have been persecuted by oyster companies in some areas along the Pacific Coast under the misguided belief that they will reduce oyster numbers. In fact, rays prey heavily on crabs, which are the primary oyster munchers. Until recently, baby leopard sharks in San Francisco Bay had to worry about religious crazies. Last year federal wildlife agents broke up an illegal poaching operation by the Moonies, who pulled over 6,000 leopard shark pups out of the Bay over the last 15 years and sold them to pet dealers.

On several kayak forays this year I sought a more benign communion with the Drake's Estero sharks and rays. Late this summer we launched at Drake's Bay Oyster Farm (making sure to time our trip with the tides), paddling an easy two miles into remote Home Bay. We glided reverently through an estuarine Eden, encountering shorebirds, cormorants, osprey, ghost-like fallow deer, brown and white pelicans, a lone bobcat, and seals both wary and curious along the way. In the shallows of Home Bay we drifted quietly as squads of dozens of one to three foot sharks, with distinctive leopard-patterned black spots and bars, finned under our boats like streamlined torpedoes. I was awestruck and captivated by their effortless grace and power and tried to imagine myself inhabiting their watery and muddy world.

You can groove on the Home Bay leopard sharks from shore if you hike Estero Trail from Estero Trailhead to the bridge over the head of Home Bay. Report poachers!

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.