

## MEET THE BASKING SHARK **THE GENTLE GIANT**

SNORKELLING WITH ONE OF THE  
**MOST IMPRESSIVE  
SHARK SPECIES**  
IN THE SCOTTISH WATERS  
OF THE HEBRIDES



— The Basking shark *Cetorhinus maximus* is the second-largest living fish, after the Whale shark, and one of three plankton-eating sharks besides the Whale shark and Megamouth shark. It is a slow-moving filter feeder and as such it shows anatomical adaptations to filter feeding, such as a greatly enlarged mouth and highly developed gill rakers, clearly visible in the photo.





On average, adult Basking sharks reach a length of 6–8 m (20–26 ft) and weigh about 5.2 tons. Some specimens still surpass 9–10 m (30–33 ft), but after years of large-scale fishing, specimens of this size have become very rare. Despite its large size and threatening appearance, this species is not aggressive and is harmless to people.

TEXT BY BRIGITTA LUYKX  
PHOTOS BY RINIE LUYKX

Captain Jimbo and Sharky, our guide, are looking through their binoculars. They stare at the sea, hoping to spot some fins. We are on our way on the Bold Ranger, a chartered boat, trying to find the great Basking sharks of Scotland. We left earlier from the jetty of The Isle of Mull, and at the moment we are in the area of Gunna. So far, no luck. Captain James decides to move on to a place called Tirey. On our way there we see lots of puffins and razorbills, and sometimes a curious seal follows us from a distance. The weather is very good for Scotland and the sea is nice and calm - perfect weather for spotting marine mammals. Just when we think there will be no sharks for today, our captain starts screaming and laughing. He points at a few spots in the distance. There are many sharks over there! Their big dorsal fins are slicing the water. It

looks very impressive, the water is so clear you can see the shark swimming under the boat. I look at Rinie and see a big smile all over his face. Our first day and plenty of sharks! Time to change into our dive suits and jump into the water to snorkel with these huge creatures. We climb down to a small platform. The captain tells us to sit down on the platform while he maneuvers so that the sharks will be swimming towards us. Finally there is the call: "Jump! Jump!". We both jump in to the water, and as soon as we look down we see a shark approaching us. Wow! My heart starts pumping fast. They are really big with their mouth wide open. Its mouth is so big I could swim straight into it - it would probably spit me out immediately because it is a filter feeder. This species eats plankton, and there is lots of plankton in the water at the moment - this explains

the large numbers of sharks that surround us. Then the shark comes so close I can almost touch it. It closes his mouth and turns away from me. When it turns I fear it will hit me with his big powerful tail, but it manages to avoid me completely. Rinie is taking pictures of this big individual. The one in front of him just turns away, but when I look behind him there are two others approaching him. I scream loud to him "Look behind you!", quickly he turns and gets his camera ready for the next two sharks. The sharks are approximately 6-8 meters long. Our captain is constantly screaming from the boat "Behind you, behind you!" - they are really everywhere, they are circling around us, everywhere we look we see sharks. After one hour and a half the numbers of sharks finally starts to decrease. And it is time for us to go back on the boat.



Basking sharks probably overwinter in deep waters. Small schools in the Bay of Fundy and the Hebrides have been seen swimming nose to tail in circles in what may be a form of mating behavior. Right, a Basking shark cruising on the surface and a colorful view of the harbour of Mull in the Scottish Hebrides.

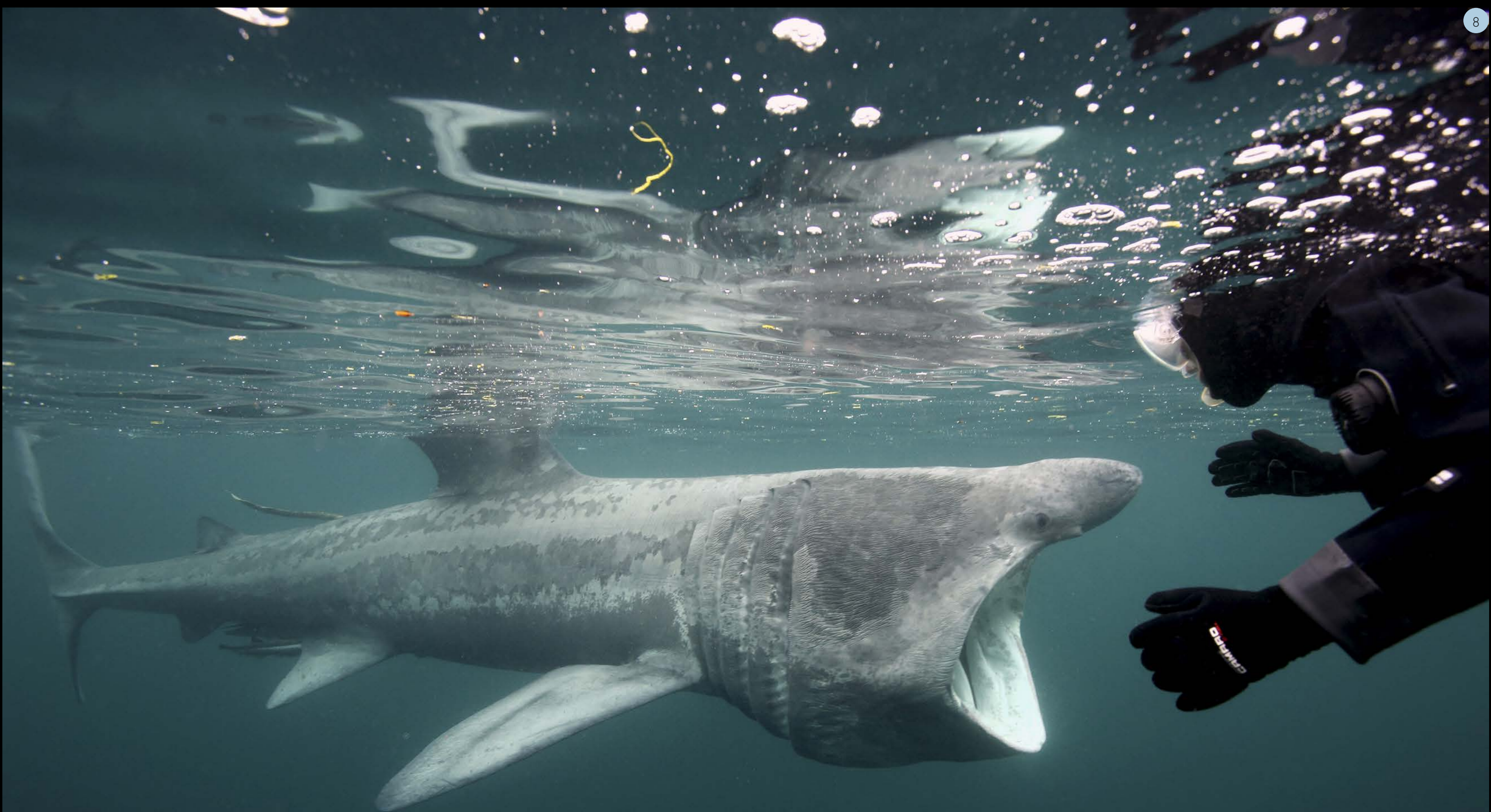




The Basking shark is a coastal-pelagic shark found worldwide in boreal to warm-temperate waters around the continental shelves. It prefers 8.0 to 14.5°C (46 to 58°F) temperatures, but it has been confirmed to cross the much-warmer waters at the Equator. It is often seen close to land, including bays with narrow openings. This species follows plankton concentrations in the water column, so it is often visible at the surface.







■ The shape of the snout is typically conical and the gill slits extend around the top and bottom of the head. The gill rakers, dark and bristle-like, are used to catch plankton as water filters through the mouth and over the gills. Basking sharks are usually greyish-brown in color with mottled skin. The caudal fin has a strong lateral keel and a crescent shape.

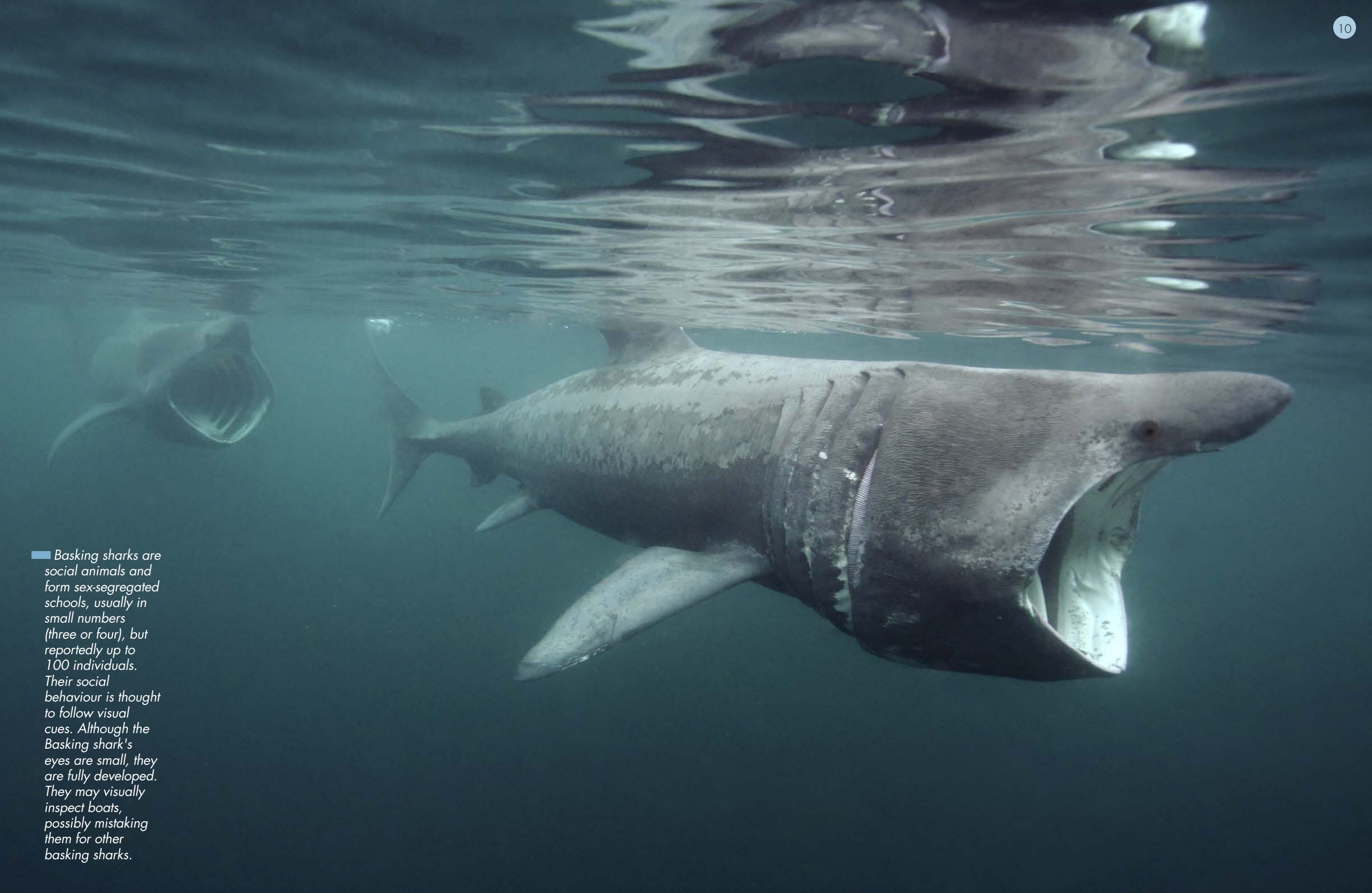




Above and left, our friend Rinie Luykx admires some beautiful Atlantic or Common puffins *Fratercula arctica*. Right, the imposing view of a Basking shark as it cruises feeding just below the surface. Adults typically reach 6-8 m in length.







■ Basking sharks are social animals and form sex-segregated schools, usually in small numbers (three or four), but reportedly up to 100 individuals. Their social behaviour is thought to follow visual cues. Although the Basking shark's eyes are small, they are fully developed. They may visually inspect boats, possibly mistaking them for other basking sharks.





*The Basking shark ■  
Cetorhinus maximus has  
long been a commercially  
important fish, as a source of  
food, shark fin, animal feed,  
and shark liver oil. Like in so  
many other shark species,  
overexploitation has reduced  
its populations to the point  
where some have  
disappeared and others  
need protection.*