



Edited by
Ila France Porcher

Aerial
view of
Malapascua
Island in the
Philippines

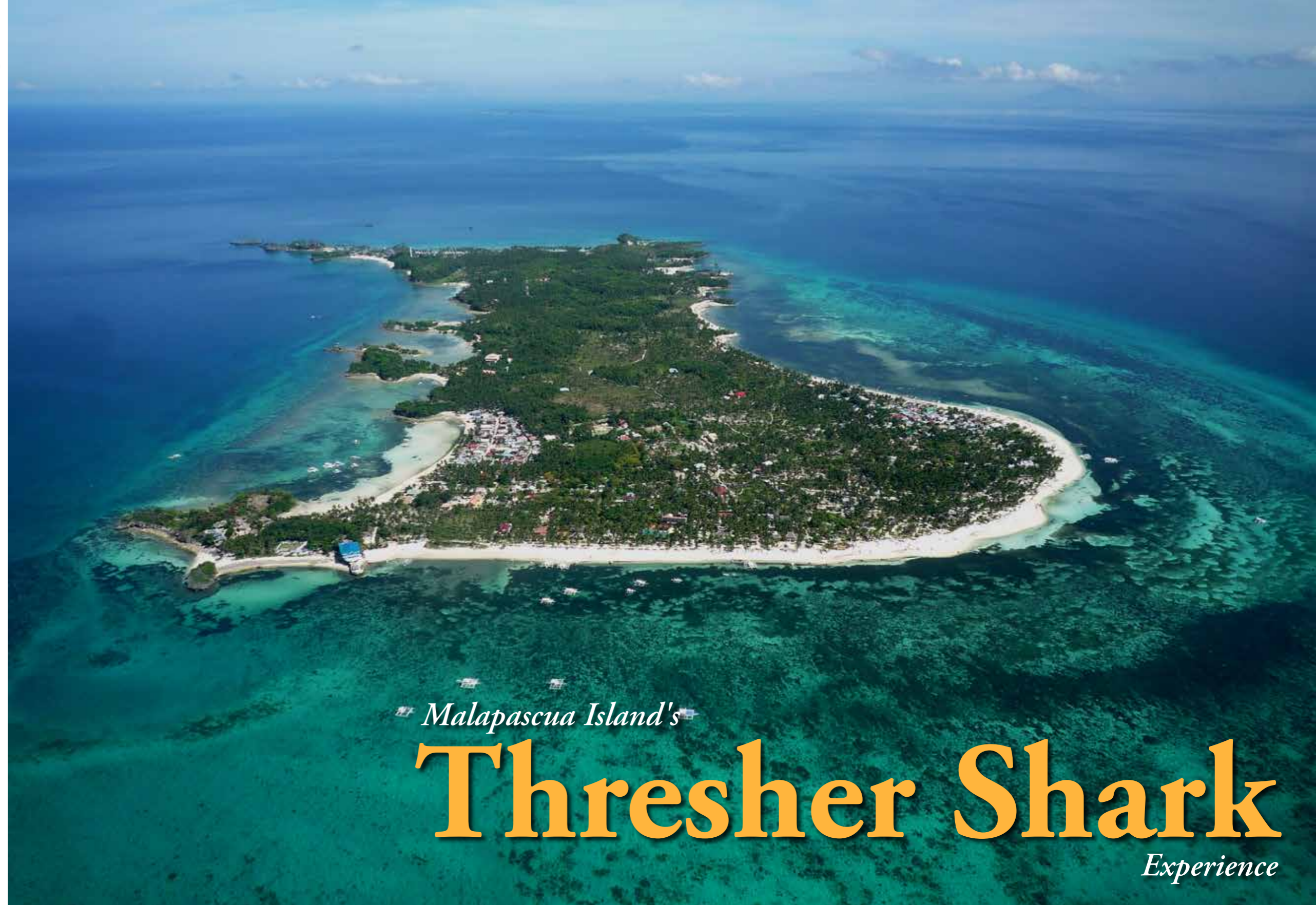
Text and photos by Kurt Amsler

The fox shark, also called the thresher shark, lives usually at depths of over 200 meters and it is sighted only rarely. This is the main reason, we don't know very much about these animals, and there is very little decent visual documentation showing thresher sharks up close on camera.

If there is a place where there is the greatest opportunity to meet the great pelagic thresher shark, it is the island Malapascua in the Philippines, about 7km east of Cebu. Here, at a depth of 20 to 25 meters, one can catch a glimpse of these elusive sharks on a plateau of a sunken island named Monad Shoal.

Attracted by several cleaning stations, the sharks come regularly before sunset for their early morning "toilette". They are cleaned by the small cleaner wrasse that clean the sharks' skin, gills and even inside their mouths of parasites, bacteria and food debris.

Due to this behavior, it also makes it necessary for observers to be there on time as well, because it is the only chance to see and approach this shark to photograph it.



Malapascua Island's

Thresher Shark

Experience

Photographing threshers

For a week now, I'd been getting up at 04:30 each morning in order to get some good shots of a thresher shark. On each dive at the Plateau I site, I saw some of them in the distance, but due to bad visi-

bility, pictures taken were blurred.

I wanted to get photographs in which the image of the animal was sharp and in good contrast, but this required that there be not more than two meters between shark and photographer—as well

as lots of luck! But patience and perseverance is a prerequisite for a wildlife photographer.

So now, I found myself again swimming confidently through the dim twilight to the edge of the plateau. Today, we'd try

a different spot, a place deeper and further away than the previous ones. Down there we would remain for 60 to 70 minutes, motionless and observing the blue-green horizon for the distinctive silhouette of the thresher shark.





The Australasia-wide perpetual photo and video shootout **with close to US\$100,000 in prizes!**



JOIN THE UNDERWATER SNAPSHOT OF AUSTRALASIA
underwaterproject.org

underwater australasia
 dive in. explore. discover underwater.com.au

Thresher Sharks



Thresher shark with cleaner wrasse on mouth

We were located right on a steep wall dropping to over 200 meters below us. But instead of sharks appearing, just swells of very cold water arrived from the depths below. I wished I'd had a few more millimeters of neoprene on my body.

Already 50 minutes had passed, and thanks to nitrox 40/60, we were still good on bottom time. Around us, it was noticeably brighter now. I was still hopeful and set the camera to these

new light conditions—to be prepared just in case.

But now something seemed to be happening in the blue-green infinity—a dark shadow appeared, still hazy but slowly more and more clear. Suddenly a huge, approximately four-meter thresher swam right up to me!

Rushing adrenaline replaced, within seconds, the chill of the morning—certainly not for fear of the sharks, but

rather the pressure not make any mistakes, either technically or behaviorly, and risk losing this incredible chance. But the old routine came flowing back after a few seconds, and I followed all the action through the viewfinder of my camera.

The shark approached slowly but surely. Then suddenly, something strange happened. In less than three meters off camera, with its pectoral fins laterally turned, the shark stopped



shark tales



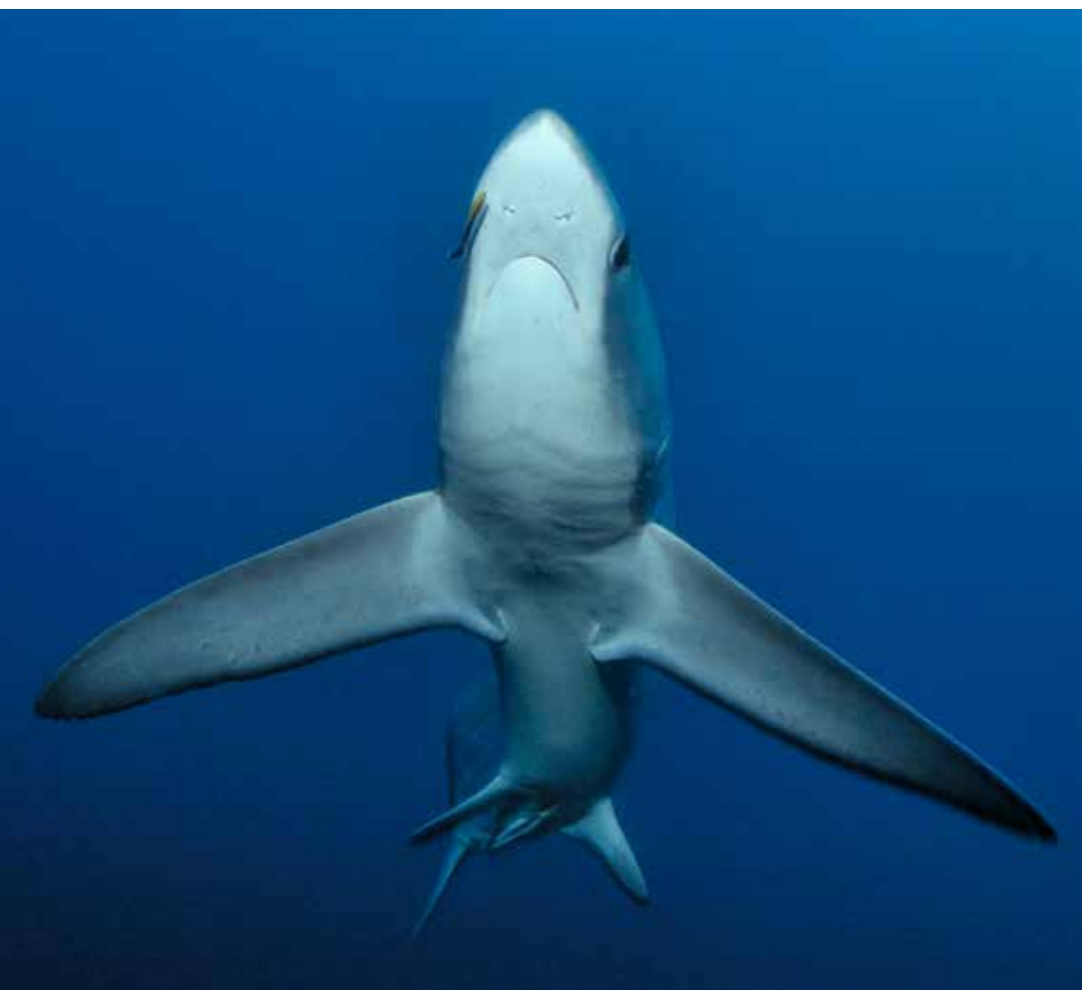
THIS PAGE: Scenes from early morning dives with thresher sharks at Monad Shoal off Malapascua Island in the Philippines

abruptly and remained almost motionless for a split second right in front of me—I pull the trigger!

I prayed to all the gods of the Philippines that the shark would not back off and disappear, never to return again. Fortunately, this was not the case. Then, almost from a still stop, the shark suddenly shot past me, over me and turned 180 degrees around, only to disappear to whence he had come.

During the whole shark encounter, I wasn't breathing at all—and for good reason—but now I had to rinse out my lungs with such vigor that all the fishes, and I guess also all the sharks, in the area escaped in a panik. But by now I didn't care—I had the "Thresher" in my box! Tomorrow I could sleep longer. ■

For more information, please visit Kurt Amsler's website at: www.photosub.com



THRESHER SHARK FACTS

CLASSIFICATION:

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Chondrichthyes
Subclass: Elasmobranchii
Superorder: Selachimorpha
Order: Lamniformes
Family: Alopiidae
Genus: *Alopias*

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The thresher shark is of the order Lamniformes (or mackerel sharks) with a tail fin that has a greatly elongated upper lobe. They are very strong swimmers that can vault completely out of the water. Threshers have a countershaded body—dark blue-gray above and white underneath. The thresher shark has small jaws, but can use its tail to corral and even kill fish. The first dorsal fin is much,

much bigger than the second; the pectoral fins are curved. Like other mackerel sharks, it has an anal fin, five gill slits, two dorsal fins, no fin spines, a mouth behind the eyes and no nictitating eyelids. It is mostly nocturnal (active at night).

SIZE: 16.5-20 ft (5-6m) long

HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION: The common thresher shark swims from the surface to a depth of about 1,150ft (350m). It lives in open tropical and temperate waters, including the eastern and western Atlantic, the central Pacific and the Indo-west Pacific.

TEETH AND DIET: The thresher shark eats squid and fish, corraling them with its elongated tail, stunning them with slaps from it, and catching

them with its very sharp (but small) teeth.

SPEED AND SWIMMING: They are very strong swimmers and can even leap out of the water.

REPRODUCTION: Threshers reproduce via aplacental viviparity; the eggs hatch inside the female. The developing embryos are ovophagous; they will eat smaller, weaker siblings while in the womb. Mature females (at least 10ft or 3m long) have litters of 4-6 pups, bearing live young. These pups are 3.5-5ft (1.1-1.5m) long at birth.

POPULATIONS: Threshers are decreasing in numbers because of overfishing; they are hunted for their meat and fins. ■

