

Great white shark researchers begin 20-day expedition Saturday

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By [Matt Soergel](#)

Brett McBride will spend the next 20 days or so from sunup to sundown looking for great white sharks who spend their winters off the coast of Jacksonville.

Without coves full of tasty seals or attractions such as that, the sharks not going to be easy to find, he said: The sharks are big but the ocean is far bigger.

So think of the shark as the proverbial needle in the haystack, said McBride, captain of the fishing operations on the 126-foot long Ocearch research vessel.

"If it can be done, these guys will do it," said Greg Skomal, a shark expert at the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries who will accompany the crew.

The steel-hulled vessel, once a Bering Straits crabbing boat like those seen on TV, was docked downtown Friday before embarking on its next mission, dubbed Expedition: Jacksonville.

It was the location for a press conference that found the media assembled in the shark cradle, the exact spot where the Ocearch's most famous shark, 16 1/2-foot Mary Lee, was examined and tagged after it was caught off Cape Cod last fall.

Mary Lee attained international fame after the satellite tracker attached to it found it poking its snout into inlets and beaches along the East Coast, including one visit into the surf zone at Jacksonville Beach.

"Mary Lee took us to Jacksonville," said Skobal, who said the waters off Northeast Florida and Georgia have long been known as winter habitats for great whites. New technology, such as the trackers on Mary Lee, make for exciting possibilities for learning much more about sharks, he said.

There's lots to learn: Skobal said he is completely stumped as to why Mary Lee turned north after making waves in Jacksonville Beach last month. It made a mid-winter return to Cape Cod — something he would once have thought improbable if not impossible — before heading south to its current location off Bermuda.

If the Ocearch crew spots a great white, or any other shark that scientists on board deem worth of study, the crew swings into action. It's a complicated routine that involves McBride swimming in the water, guiding the creature on to the boat. "It's a really well choreographed dance you do," he said.

Once on the boat, scientists have 15 minutes to perform a health check on the shark and to attach a satellite device to track it, a device that will send signals for up to two years, every time the shark surfaces.

Chris Fischer, founder of Ocearch, a nonprofit devoted to oceanic research, said Expedition Jacksonville will be in the tradition of great explorations through history — and also the chance to get "centrist, data-driven" research on the much-maligned great white sharks.

Fischer is former host of ESPN's "Offshore Adventures," and his crew's exploits have been featured on the History channel and National Geographic.

Unlike the fictional town leaders in "Jaws" who tried to keep their sharks hush-hush, Mayor Alvin Brown, who hosted the press conference on the vessel, was beaming about the exposure this expedition will give his city.

Brown even plans to spend a day on the Ocearch vessel next week, joined by Fischer's brother, Greg, who is mayor of Louisville, Ky.

"If we catch a shark that day, we'll have to call it 'the mayor,'" Fischer said.

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