

Nurse Shark

Ginglymostoma cirratum

Relatives: The nurse shark is a member of the family Rhincodontidae, along with zebra sharks and whale sharks. They are the only shark in their genus.



Appearance: Adult nurse sharks are typically light yellowish tan to dark gray/brown. Some have a purple or orange sheen to their skin. Young sharks have small black spots covering their body with a lighter-colored ring around each spot. The skin is smoother to the touch than most other sharks. Nurse sharks have two rounded dorsal fins, with the first larger than the second. They do not have spines associated with their dorsal fins. Nurse sharks have a stout body and a wide head with two fleshy appendages (barbels) extending from their upper lip. These are sensory organs that help them locate food on the ocean floor. They also have small openings, called spiracles, just behind their eyes. These help them to breathe more easily while resting on the bottom. Instead of sucking sandy water in through their gills, they can pull clear water in through the spiracles and then force it out through the gills.

Size:

- 7½-9 feet long
- 165-230 lbs
- Females are typically larger than males

Range: Nurse sharks can be found in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as the Caribbean. In the Atlantic Ocean, they are found from Rhode Island to southern Brazil and from Cameroon to Gabon. They are found only in the eastern Pacific Ocean, from Mexico to Peru.



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Habitat: Nurse sharks live in tropical and subtropical waters at depths of 3 to 250 feet. They are bottom-dwelling sharks that prefer coral reefs, salt flats and channels between mangrove islands.

Feeding: Nurse sharks are nocturnal predators, feeding on bottom-dwelling fish (including stingrays), octopuses, squid, clams, conches, crabs, lobster, shrimp, sea urchins and coral. These sharks have thin, fleshy, whisker-like appendages (barbels) on the upper jaw in front of the nostrils that help them locate food along the bottom. Like other sharks, they also have electroreceptors along their snout to help them locate prey that is buried in the sand and mud. They have small mouths, but a strong suction power that allows them to vacuum up food at high speeds.

Nurse sharks have very strong jaws with thousands of small, serrated teeth that are capable of crushing shellfish and other crunchy food items. The teeth are arranged in rows, and are replaced when broken or lost by teeth that rotate into position. Teeth replace more quickly in the summer months when water temperatures are warmer.

Breeding: Nurse sharks do not reach maturity until they are 15 to 20 years old. The mating season occurs from late June to late July. Nurse sharks are ovoviviparous, meaning that the eggs develop and hatch within the body of the female where the hatchlings develop further until live birth occurs. The gestation period lasts for about 6 months, with a typical litter size of 20 to 30 pups. Nurse shark pups are 11 to 12 inches long and fully developed at birth. It takes 18 months for the female's ovaries to produce another batch of eggs, so mating occurs every other year.

Behavior: Nurse sharks are nocturnally active, and are mostly solitary as they search for food. During the day, however, they will congregate in groups of up to 40 individuals, often lying in a sluggish pile on the ocean floor, or hidden under ledges or crevices in the reef. They often return to the same resting sites each day after a night of hunting. Nurse sharks are generally docile unless provoked. They do not migrate to different areas as water temperatures cool, but instead, simply become less active.

Predators: There are no species that regularly hunt nurse sharks. However, they are occasionally preyed upon by larger fish such as tiger sharks and lemon sharks.

Lifespan: Nurse sharks have lived more than 25 years in an aquarium.

Conservation: Nurse sharks are currently listed as **Data Deficient** by the IUCN, meaning that "there is inadequate information to make a direct, or indirect, assessment of its risk of extinction based on its distribution and/or population status".

Nurse sharks are not widely commercially fished, but because of their sluggish behavior they are an easy target for local fisheries. The skin is tough and is prized for leather. The flesh is consumed or used as crab bait, and the liver is utilized for oil. Nurse sharks are not taken as game fish; however they are sometimes caught and killed by fishermen because they are considered a nuisance animal that takes bait intended for other fish.

Nurse Shark- cont.

o *Shark Cove* o

Other: Scientists are unclear as to how they came to be called “nurse” sharks, but it is believed that the term “nurse” was derived from the common name “nusse”, which originally referred to cat-sharks of the family Scyliorhinidae. The nurse shark was once thought to belong to this family, and is still referred to as a cat-shark in some regions.