



# SHARK STEWARDS

## RESTORING OCEAN HEALTH BY SAVING SHARKS

### LEOPARD SHARK

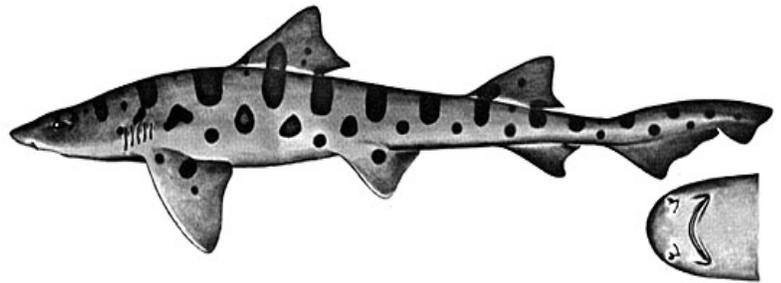
(*Triakis semifasciata*)

**Order** - Carchariniformes

**Family** – Triakidae

**Genus** – Triakis

**Species** - semifasciata



The leopard shark, also known as a hound shark, typically grows to a size of 20-50 inches. Some leopard sharks grow up to 6 feet in length, with a diet comprised of invertebrates and small fish. These sharks are not currently listed as endangered or threatened but are still potentially threatened by over-fishing and habitat loss.

### GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

The leopard shark, which prefers cool and warm temperate waters, can be found in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, in the region of Oregon to the Gulf of California in Mexico. These sharks can also be found in large estuaries, including the San Francisco Bay where they give birth to live pups. The leopard shark typically populates sandy, muddy bays and estuaries and tends to remain at or near the bottom. This shark is typically observed in 20 feet of water or less, but also are found in rocky kelp habitat. Some leopard sharks have been observed in depths of up to 300 feet.

### DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS

1. Broad and short snout with nasal folds
2. Broad and triangular pectoral fins,
3. Notched, asymmetrical caudal fin
4. Distinct coloration and markings

### BIOLOGY

#### → Distinctive Features

The snout of a leopard shark is broad and short, and the pectoral fins are broad and triangular. The first dorsal fin is taller than the second. The tail of a leopard shark has a notched and elongated upper lobe. The leopard shark is a strong swimmer and typically travels in schools. Leopard sharks also have more erythrocytes, or red blood cells, than similar sharks, meaning that they can absorb oxygen from the water more easily. Leopard sharks are also pavement toothed, meaning that they have tooth sets that overlap, forming a large, flat, ridged surface.

## → Coloration

Like many ocean animals, the dorsal surface, or top, of a leopard shark, is darker than the ventral surface, or the bottom. The dorsal surface of a leopard shark is covered in dark colored splotches, ranging from silver to grey. The ventral surface of the leopard shark is lighter in color, sometimes white. Leopard sharks are also pavement toothed, meaning that they have tooth sets that overlap, forming a large, flat, ridged surface.

### FUN FACT

**Leopard sharks have unique saddle markings and spots on their dorsal surface. The markings can be used to identify individuals through photo ID.**

## → Size and Age

While it is rare to see a leopard shark larger than 6 feet in length, leopard sharks can reach 7 feet in length. However, the average size of a leopard shark is around 50-60 inches total length and live up to 30 years.

## → Food Habits

The leopard shark survives on a diet of invertebrates and small fish, including crabs, shrimp, work tubes, bat rays, and smooth hounds. Leopard sharks mutilate their prey, only taking the parts of their prey that they intend to eat.

## → Reproduction

The mode of reproduction is ovoviviparity (eggs hatch internally) with the leopard shark producing litters of 4 to 29 pups. Pregnant leopard sharks give birth after a 12-month gestation period during April and May. Pups are typically born at 8 to 9 inches and reach maturity when they are 3 to 3.5 feet in length.

## → Predators

Large fish are known to prey on leopard sharks, including other sharks, including marine mammals such as sealions. Recreational fishermen also harvest the leopard shark as a food source and for sport.

### SEE A LEOPARD SHARK? SharkWatch



Scan the QR, add a photo & report a sighting, take the survey, and support science.

## DANGER TO HUMANS

These sharks are not dangerous to humans. Bites to fishermen handling captured leopard sharks have occurred, but without serious injury. In general, these sharks are shy and avoid humans. While leopard sharks are not directly dangerous to humans, adults can contain high levels of mercury and other toxins, and should not be eaten on a regular basis.

## CONSERVATION

Leopard sharks are listed as “least concern” by the IUCN. However, leopard sharks are vulnerable to over-fishing and as bycatch in gill nets, loss of habitat and pollution. In some cases, they have been illegally harvested to supply the aquarium trade. These sharks have a slow growth rate and low reproduction rate, which compounds the problem. Leopard sharks also first reproduce relatively late, leaving the population vulnerable when over-fished. The population of leopard sharks off the coast of California and Oregon are large and considered to be well protected. The status of the population off the coast of Mexico is unknown.