

Aerial image of  
Vaul Bay, TireeSuccess! A tope shark  
captured on remote camera

# The Tope of Tiree a BSAC shark expedition

**Rob Mason** reports on Dearne Valley Divers' ambitious project to film elusive British sharks off a beautiful beach in the Hebrides

The beach seemed almost too perfect to be real. White sand stretched into the distance, backed by rolling dunes of machair, while turquoise Atlantic waters shimmered in the summer sunlight. It felt like I'd stumbled upon a little piece of paradise.

I reached for my drone, keen to capture the scene from above. As I was setting up, a local approached and casually asked a question that would change everything. "Are you here to film the sharks?" Sharks?

Until that moment, I had no idea that hundreds of tope sharks regularly gathered in the waters around this beautiful, remote corner of Tiree. I was fascinated. Could this natural spectacle provide the inspiration for an expedition that would bring divers together, creating a sense of purpose within the club? At the time, it seemed more than a little absurd.

Fast forward to 2026, and that idea suddenly took on a new significance.

I suspect most diving clubs experience it at some point: that moment when the excitement and variety of branch life begin to feel a little repetitive, and the sense of adventure can become harder to maintain. Enthusiasm can ebb and motivation can

waver, but these moments also present an opportunity to try something different, bring people together and rediscover what makes diving so rewarding.

At Dearne Valley Divers, that led us to start thinking beyond simply organising the next dive or the next social event. What could we do that would give our members a shared challenge, a genuine sense of purpose and the opportunity to be part of something bigger? The answer, it turned out, would take us far beyond our usual diving grounds and ultimately lead to an ambitious expedition to a remote Hebridean island.

## Something better change

The Tiree idea was dusted off. Brief conversations with the Shark Trust and BSAC CEO Mary Tetley at the 2026 Go Diving show provided the catalyst, and within weeks I found myself on a Teams call with the Shark Trust, Edinburgh Napier University and NatureScot.

Then came another stroke of good fortune. Napier University had already identified Tiree for a summer tope shark research project. This fermented the opportunity to combine their work with a Citizen Science expedition. All three

Vaul Bay from  
ground level

organisations were hugely supportive of the idea of divers collecting valuable data on Tiree's tope sharks.

The final challenge was to sell the idea to Dearne Valley Divers and mobilise an expedition team — all within an insanely ambitious three-month window.

The proposal was put to members on 22 April: a self-sufficient team, open to divers of any qualification, travelling to Tiree to dive and snorkel, capturing underwater footage of tope behaviour and gathering data on their numbers.

The response was incredible. The club embraced the idea wholeheartedly and threw its full support behind the project. What had started as a slightly absurd idea was suddenly becoming a reality.

But new challenges appeared almost immediately. Tiree is a small, remote island where summer accommodation is scarce, ferry places can be limited and facilities are few. We needed to build the expedition from the ground up, which meant securing boat cover, a compressor, first-aid arrangements, camera systems and everything else required to operate as a self-sufficient team.

## The clock was ticking...

A reconnaissance trip was hastily arranged. In June, the club Secretary Sir Paul Tarn and I headed to Tiree to assess boat moorings and slipways. We also met with Phyl Meyer and Hayley Douglas from the Tiree Community Development Trust to explain our plans and seek their advice.

From the outset, we wanted to benefit from local knowledge and ensure the expedition had as little impact as possible on

The expedition  
team, all smiles



The camera  
'laboratory'



Remote  
camera  
in place



eDNA  
Sampling

both the island community and the sharks.

On our return, we made the difficult decision to abandon plans to take our own boat. Ferry places were unavailable, and there was no guarantee we could secure a crossing from Tobermory. It was a disappointing setback, but we had to find another way.

As luck would have it, the club already

had a couple of keen kayakers among its members. Two kayaks would provide the surface cover we needed.

Very quickly, the expedition team grew to 18 members, including four from Aberdeen University Sub-Aqua Club. This proved another stroke of luck. Ethan, a former club member now studying Marine Biology at Aberdeen, along with Finlay, Michael and

Millie, generously offered to bring their club's portable compressor — another vital piece of the puzzle falling neatly into place.

The final challenge was finding a way to capture underwater footage across a wide area without disturbing the sharks. Following advice from Napier University researcher Natasha Yates, we decided to develop non-baited remote underwater camera stations.



Dominik on  
shore cover

The expedition week flew by. Our first camera deployment didn't quite go to plan. The camera weights were too heavy for divers and snorkellers to transport, while our 4mm shotlines created so much drag in the tidal flow that cameras began drifting off station. Fortunately, none were lost.

By the end of Day 2, we had nearly lost two cameras; all we'd managed to

film was a solitary duck underwater! Undeterred, we refined the systems, adjusted camera positions and locations, and improved our deployment and recovery techniques. By Day 3, we had cracked it – and captured our first glimpse of tope sharks underwater!

The camera work continued to improve throughout the week.



Camera deployment



Diver first aid section

Aberdeen University Suba Aqua Club



This went against the conventional approach, where bait is often used to attract sharks to remote video systems. But a non-baited system was simpler to deploy and, more importantly, allowed us to observe and record the sharks behaving naturally rather than gathering around a food source.

Armed with a few action cameras, branch members Richard Slater, Neil Wilson, Mark Warner and Sir Paul Tarn set about developing ideas for remote camera rigs. The prototypes were tested in the pool at Dearnside Leisure Centre, refined and tested again.

Ultimately, we developed three versions of camera systems, each ready for the waters of Tiree.

A final round of BSAC Skill Development Courses, along with training in camera deployment and recovery, completed the team's preparations.

## Ready to go

On the early morning of 31 July, the team finally set sail from Oban for Tiree. After months of planning and preparation, the expedition was underway.

In another stroke of good fortune, Professor James Thorburn and Natasha Yates from Edinburgh Napier University were also on the island, conducting shore-based research into the tope aggregation. Their presence gave us a fantastic opportunity to benefit from first-hand advice and guidance from the people at the forefront of the research.



Tope sharks filmed by the remote camera





Post expedition group photo



Diver training in action



Rescue training

Following discussions with Natasha, we also undertook environmental DNA sampling on behalf of Edinburgh Napier University, adding another valuable dimension to the project. The Citizen Science element was really starting to come through.

However, the expedition wasn't all about sharks and camera systems. The team made time to experience the magic of Tiree and its people. We visited the Alan Stevenson Museum (and its restaurant!), explored the Tiree Distillery and enjoyed some of the island's spectacular beaches.

There was even time for diver training. Club instructors Lady Pam Tarn and Sammy Norton completed Sports Diver training with Jaene Booth, while trainees John Cotterill and Jackie Whitehouse continued their own development. It really was the trip that kept on giving.

Exped members carry out a beach clean

After completing the obligatory beach clean at Vaul Bay, we said our farewells to Tiree on 7 August.

### Was it worth all the effort?

Hand on heart, absolutely. The expedition has sparked a renewed wave of enthusiasm across the club, with a noticeable increase in try-dives, diving activity and member engagement.

What began as a slightly absurd idea has delivered far more than we could have imagined – valuable Citizen Science, new skills, new friendships and, most importantly, a renewed sense of purpose and excitement within the club.

Perhaps the greatest achievement wasn't finding the sharks, but discovering what happens when a group of divers comes together with a shared sense of adventure, purpose and possibility. ●

## A letter from Edinburgh Napier University

I am pleased to provide this letter of support for Dearne Valley Divers BSAC branch and their contribution to our research on tope sharks (*Galeorhinus galeus*) in Vaul Bay, Tiree, during 2026.

Vaul Bay appears to be an important site for tope, with large aggregations regularly occurring in shallow water. Our research at Edinburgh Napier University aims to understand what the sharks are doing at the site, why they return, how they use different parts of the bay, and how important the area may be within their wider movements and ecology. We are addressing these questions using drone surveys and baited underwater camera systems.

The additional work undertaken by Dearne Valley Divers will provide valuable complementary information. In particular, mapping habitats within the bay and deploying non-baited underwater cameras more widely across the site will help us understand how shark occurrence relates to different habitat types and areas of the bay.

Underwater imagery can also allow us to determine the sex of individual sharks and estimate their body size. Deploying cameras across multiple locations therefore offers an opportunity to investigate whether sharks of different sexes or sizes use particular habitats or parts of the bay differently.

The work by Dearne Valley Divers has made a valuable contribution to the wider research programme at Vaul Bay and help improve our understanding of the ecological importance of this unusual aggregation site.

**Professor James Thorburn,**  
Professor of Applied Marine Ecology

2027  
courses now  
available

# Learn more. Grow more. Explore more.

Every new skill takes you further,  
in the water and beyond.

Our training events cover everything from snorkel skills courses open to all (including non-divers) to First Class Diver grade training, right up to instructor level. Find your next step and book today at **bsac.com/events**, or scan the QR code.

Questions? We're here to help.  
**bookings@bsac.com | 0151 350 6205**

**BSAC**  
Dive with us

NATIONAL GOVERNING BODY