

Are you safe in the waters off Del Norte County

September 1, 2025



On 23 July 2025 Cody Gardner and three companions were fishing a familiar location about 300 feet from shore near Wilson Creek Beach at the north end of False Klamath Cove near the town of Klamath. It was about 8:00am when they had moved several times to their present location. The sky was overcast with no discernable wind and a very calm sea surface. They had caught many fish which they had cleaned in their kayaks with blood discharging into the water.

It was about 9:30am when Gardner noticed a very large Great White Shark about two feet below the surface passing by his kayak. The shark was heading from the stern of his kayak toward the bow and was turned on its side looking at him as it passed. The shark then turned toward the right and headed down toward the bottom. He yelled, “Great White” and was immediately hit by the shark. It grabbed the bow on the port side of the kayak shaking it for 2-3 seconds before releasing it and swimming out of sight. The group huddled together and headed toward shore. None of the fishermen were injured.

So, why did the shark attack his kayak? To understand why we need to know that there are only three types of interactions that can occur between a shark and a human or inanimate object; investigation, provoked attack, and unprovoked attack. Encounter; A shark encounter typically consists of a shark leisurely circling and/or slowly swimming past the subject without any aggressive behavior being exhibited. Encounters are always non-violent, and the shark’s movements are usually described as “smooth and methodical.” Divers

have referred to this shark behavior as “being checked out by a shark.” It is somewhat compelling that there are more shark encounters annually off the Pacific Coast than provoked or unprovoked attacks combined. Provoked; A provoked shark attack is the result of a human taking an offensive action that causes a shark to attack. These actions could be pulling a shark’s tail, jabbing or poking a shark with a spear gun or similar object, cornering or cutting off a shark’s route to open water, attempting to feed a shark by hand, chumming or baiting a shark to your area, and/or making an aggressive gesture toward an approaching shark. These are just a few examples of the types of actions that might provoke a shark to strike out. Unprovoked; An unprovoked shark attack is the aggressive pursuit, biting or striking of a human or their equipment, without any known provocative action by the subject. This is not to say that the subject might not have displayed a provocative gesture that triggered the attack; only that no provocative action was known to have occurred. Any physical contact between a shark and a human, or piece of equipment being utilized by the human, constitutes an unprovoked shark attack. For example, there are numerous cases - mostly involving surfers - of shark attacks recorded along the Pacific Coast where only the equipment being used in the water activity was bitten by the attacking shark.

What was the motivation for the attack on the kayak? There are also only three primary categories of shark behaviors or motivations; investigation, predatory, or displacement. Investigation; the shark approaches an object and frequently circles and/or swims up to it and eventually takes a bite. The movements of the shark are generally slow and methodical without an violent aggression being directed at the object. Predatory; the shark targets a prey, whether fish or marine mammal, and pursues and subdues the animal, frequently with a high energy impact that immobilizes or kills the prey on contact. This action can involve a bite or ramming the prey. Displacement; is usually a violent response by the shark to an object or individual that it perceives to be a threat to its space or territory. This area can be for feeding, mating, or pupping. These violent aggressive actions are frequently preceded with displays or agitated body movements, which are not generally observed at the surface of the water.

So it would appear that the attack on Gardner’s kayak was motivated by the chumming of fish blood and would therefore be considered provoked. Because the shark struck and held the kayak it would be considered a displacement behavior to drive the object from an area being used for hunting by the shark.

However the question still remains - ‘are the waters off Del Norte County safe’? To answer that question we need to check the history of shark attacks in California. From 1950 to Gardner’s incident in July 2025 there have been 242 verifiable shark attacks directed at humans. Of this number, only 4 (1.65%) , representing 3 surfers and Gardner’s kayak, occurred in Del Norte County. Statistically these numbers are not significant compared to other hazards faced in our daily lives, unless of course you are the subject of such an event. However, there are some suggestions for those utilizing California’s coastal waters that might lower the possibility and provide you with some peace of mind.

These are General Principals that can be applied to all ocean water user groups; 1. Never enter the sea alone. Participation in any water-sport activity is more enjoyable - and certainly safer - when accompanied by a companion.

2. Seek certification in advanced CPR and emergency first aid from an accredited school or organization.
3. Carry on your person at all times a 1 - meter (3ft) length of surgical tubing, for use as a tourniquet in the event of arterial (pulsed) bleeding.
4. Be aware of your surroundings and watch for unusual behavior by marine organisms, such as bait fish jumping out of the water a sign something might be chasing them or a marine mammal moving swiftly to shore or a rock to exit the water. These actions could alert you to a sharks presences.
5. If you suddenly become 'uneasy' leave the water immediately as your instincts might be providing a warning of impending danger.
6. If a shark has been reported recently in a specific area you might want to consider another location or day to engage in your ocean water activity.
7. Avoid areas near streams or rivers during seasons when salmon or other anadromous fishes are spawning.
8. Avoid utilizing areas near pinniped (seal and sea lion) haul out sites or rookeries, for obvious reasons.
9. Avoid wearing jewelry as the suns reflection will possibly mimic an injured fish and attract the attention of any shark nearby.
10. Avoid cleaning fish or other marine organisms in the water as it could attract a shark to that location.

Finally, use common sense when engaged in ocean water activities and know that statistically you have a greater probability of being injured or killed by a cow than you do by a shark. Enjoy our oceans responsibly and with compassion for those creatures that live therein.