

Manx Basking Shark Watch Report 2009

By Eleanor Stone

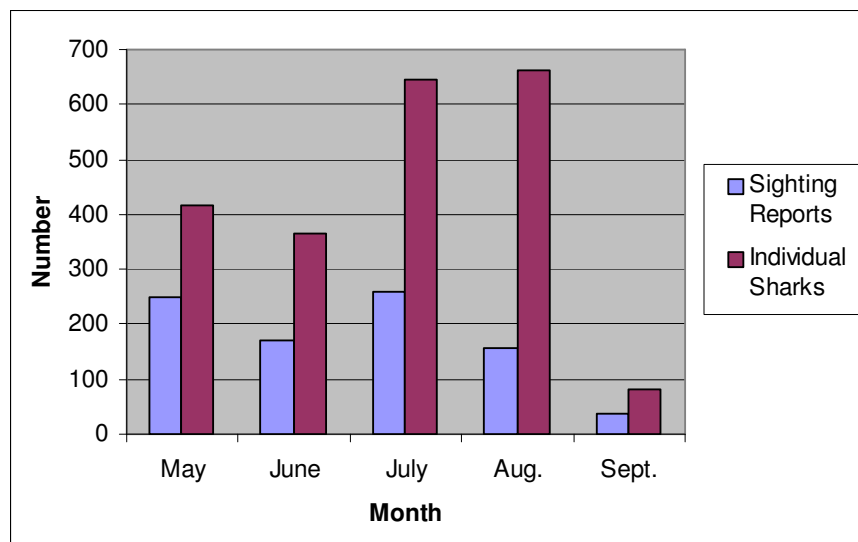
2009 was a record year for basking shark sightings in the Isle of Man and created yet more questions about what these magnificent creatures are doing around our coastline.

2009 Highlights

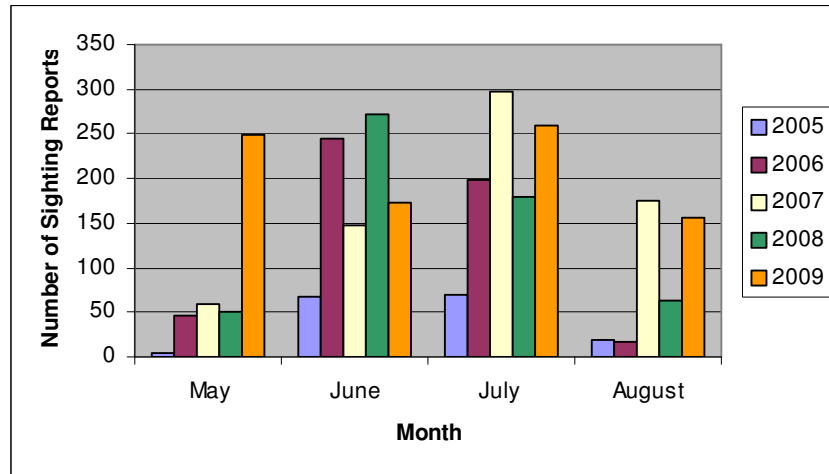
- A total of 877 sightings reported – easily beating the previous record of 677 in 2007!
- A total of 2167 individual sharks seen.
- The largest group reported was of 40 sharks, spread between Peel hill and Contrary head in early August.
- There were 2 early sightings (1 in each of March and April) and several late sightings (39 in September and even one in October and one in November!).
- 8 new sharks were satellite tagged.
- Photo identification was started and has so far found at least 54 different sharks in Manx waters.
- A major German film crew visited to film basking sharks and other Manx wildlife.
- The MWT's Manx Basking Shark Watch co-hosted the first world basking shark conference in Port Erin.

An Overview of the Sightings

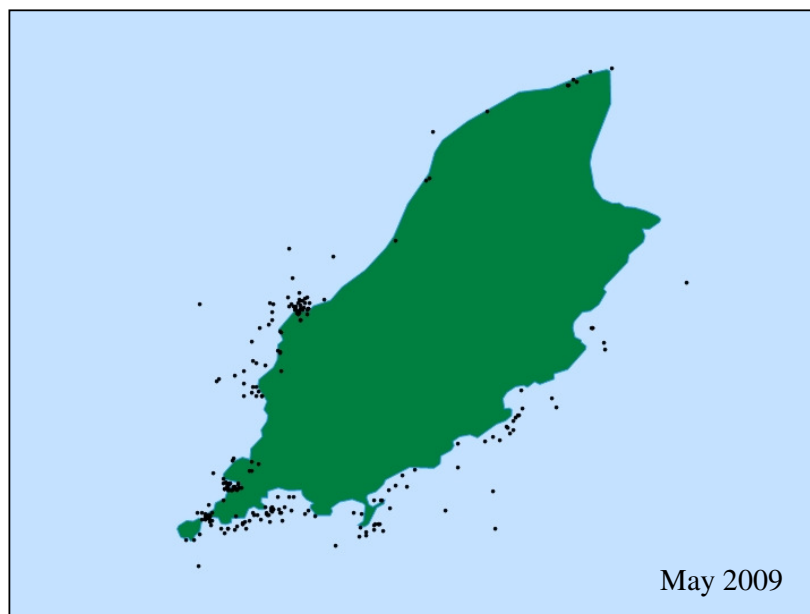
The graph below shows a breakdown of when the shark sightings were and how many individuals were seen in 2009. As it can be seen, there were at least 150 sightings in each of the main months of the season (May-August), with July being the peak month at 259 sightings. July and August had considerably higher numbers of individual sharks, due to several large groups being seen. Although we normally consider mid August to be the end of the shark season, September has been included here too due to the unusually high number of sightings – 39 sightings of 82 individuals!



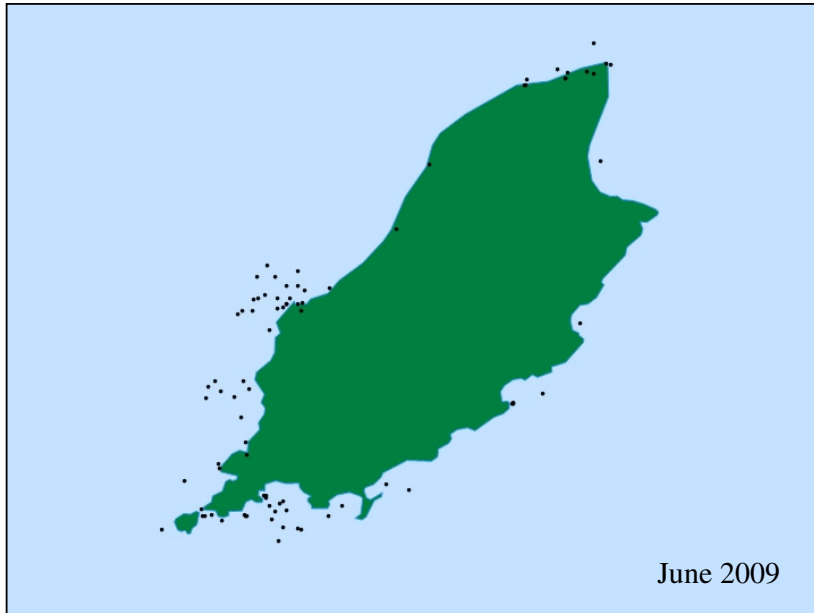
The next graph shows how this year's number of sightings compares with the 4 previous years. As you can see, there are a few differences! This really highlights the fact that we need to continue to record sightings and do more scientific research to truly understand the sharks. The most surprising result is that 2009 saw a much larger number of sightings in May than in previous years – 248 compared to only 159 in all the other years put together! August and July had relatively high numbers of sightings also, whereas June had relatively few numbers of sightings. However, there are many changes year on year and we are only just starting to try and work out why this may be the case. It may simply be influenced by the number of people out watching or may be due to environmental factors.



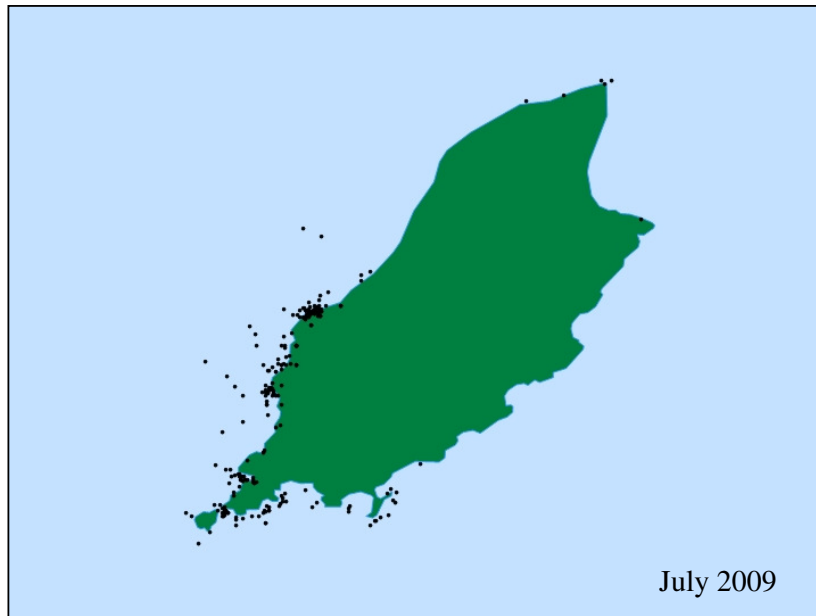
The maps below show the locations of the sightings in 2009, month by month.



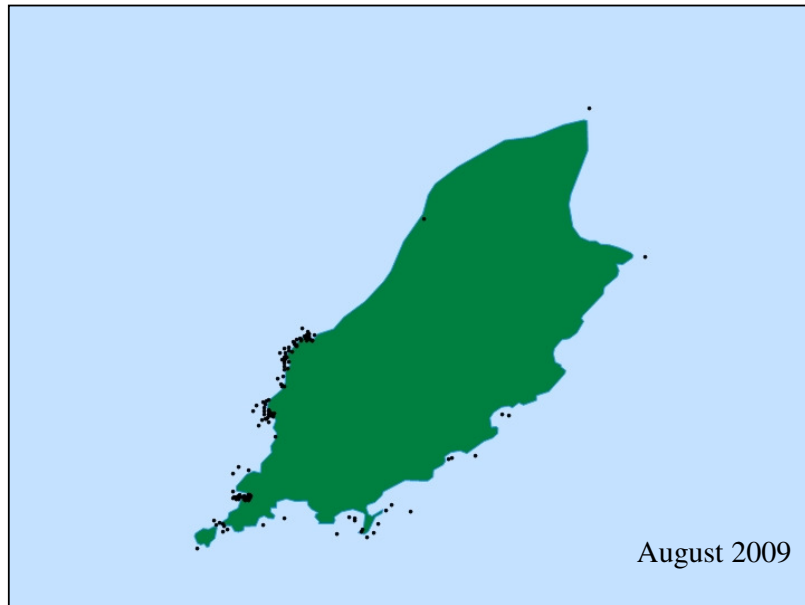
A large number of sightings in May and an especially large number on the east coast. Langness and Douglas head in particular had a lot of sightings.



Unusually low number of sightings in June, but more normally distributed along the west and south coasts. A good number of sightings up at the Ayres as well though.



Sighting numbers back up in July, with the majority being seen along the west coast from Peel southwards.



There were still plenty of west coast sightings in August, especially close into shore around Peel, Niarbyl and in Port Erin bay.

In total, just over 2000 individual sharks were reported, of which about 1600 had size estimates. Knowing the size of individuals can really help with understanding the structure of the population – for example, how many sharks are being born and how many adults are reaching a large enough size to be reproductively active. The table below shows the number of individuals seen in each size class. As would be expected, the majority of sightings are in the medium size classes and are between 4 and 8 metres. However, 21 newborns and 93 very large sharks is a relatively high percentage and is comparable with previous years.

	<2m	2-4m	4-6m	6-8m	>8m
Total Number	21	344	750	441	93

Breaching basking sharks are always a popular and amazing sight to see and can indicate courtship behaviour. In 2009, 23 breaches were reported to the website and were relatively evenly distributed throughout the season.

Tagging Project

Following on from successful tagging work in previous years, the Manx Basking Shark Watch tagged a further 8 sharks in 2009. We funded 3 of these – in fact 2 were recycled and refurbished from ones used by MBSW before. We were very pleased to be able to work with a French research group, APECS, to deploy the other 5 for them. The satellite tags were programmed to stay on for 240 days – it is hoped that this longer period of time will reveal where the sharks go over winter. The map below shows where all of the sharks were tagged, along with their ‘name’ and the date and time of deployment. So far 3 of the tags have come off and we are eagerly awaiting the data that was collected.

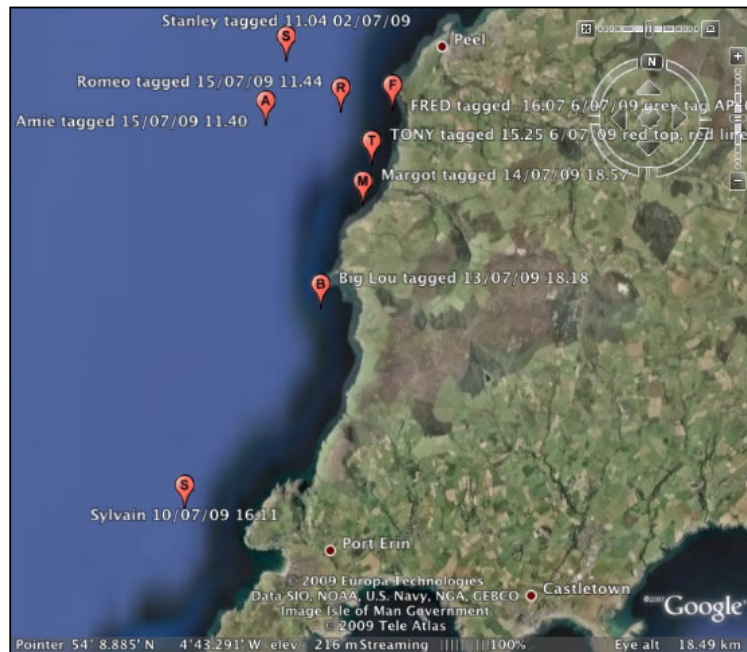


Photo Identification

In 2009 we were able to start a dedicated photo identification project on the basking sharks. Each shark's dorsal fin has a unique pattern of notches, scars, pigmentation and other markings and by taking photos of the fins we are building up a catalogue of all the different individuals that we see. Over time, this will allow us to see how many different sharks use Manx waters, how long each shark is here for and whether the same sharks are coming back year on year.

To date, we have 54 different individuals in our catalogue, with most of them being first identified in 2009. We do have some good fin shots from previous years though and have managed to match a shark seen last year to one seen in 2008 and a shark seen in 2005 was also seen last year. The 2 photos below give an example of how recognisable and different the fins can look – we look most closely at the edge of the fin for different nicks.



Filming work

We went for quality over quantity when it came to filming work this year and only had one major film crew over – a group from Germany filming an educational documentary about basking sharks around the Isle of Man, interlinked with some of our other fabulous wildlife. We are still expecting the full-length documentary to come out over this winter, but a taster is still available to watch at http://www.daserste.de/wwwissen/beitrag_dyn~uid,pfjszn13z3l7mf44~cm.asp.

Although the film crew were incredibly unlucky when they first came over – not only was the weather very poor, but also they were here for the 3 weeks in June when the sharks disappeared – when their underwater cameraman came back in July, all went good and he got the footage he needed.

Basking Sharks – A Global Perspective

At the beginning of August, MBSW were delighted to co-host and take part in the first international conference dedicated to basking sharks. This really was a milestone in basking shark research and is already having many positive impacts on their conservation. One of its most useful outcomes was increasing the amount of collaboration between different research groups, which will hopefully lead to a much greater understanding of basking shark populations as a whole.

In conclusion, 2009 was a great year for basking shark spotting on the Isle of Man and a good year of progress for MBSW. A huge thank you to all those who have reported sightings - please keep them coming! Also we are extremely grateful for our generous sponsors and the many volunteers who have dedicated so much time to conserving an iconic Manx species, the basking shark.