

# taking the bait

DAMIEN GROUILLE (5)



**W**e're 45 metres below the sea's surface, off Waterfall Bluff on South Africa's Wild Coast. Just above us floats a gigantic living, pulsating sphere, a whirlwind of sardines that could envelop a 12-storey building. The dive-masters tell us it's the baitball of the decade – and we're right there. It's my first ever sardine run, so I reckon Neptune must be smiling on me.

How to describe something so huge that its scale and intensity make us feel tiny? Sharks by the hundred swim in every direction through water clouded with sardine scales. Alongside them, and ignoring them completely, patrol the dolphins. These master strategists zigzag between the streaks of bubbles that mark the passage of Cape gannets, transformed for now into living torpedoes.

I'm concentrating on photographing the sinister expression of an innocuous ragged-tooth shark – a rare participant in the sardine run – and I pay for my momentary inattention by getting immersed in the giant baitball. Suddenly I'm in a bubble in the midst of an almost solid mass of sardines. The living wall tears and reveals, just an arm's length away, a dusky shark as disorientated as I am. We bump briefly, fortunately with no harm to either of us, and a few seconds later I manage to swim out of the ball, reaching the surface among a flock of well-fed gannets. Resting on the ocean, both they and I have been nourished by this incredible annual event.

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Read more about the South Africa's sardine run spectacle in the May 2008 issue of Africa Geographic.

