



**TIGERS**

**IN  
FOR  
THE**

**KILL**

**TIGER SHARKS CAN  
MAKE LIFE BRUTAL  
AND BRIEF FOR  
ALBATROSS CHICKS  
LEARNING TO FLY AT  
HAWAII'S FRENCH  
FRIGATE SHOALS.**





Article and  
photographs by  
BILL CURTSINGER

**F**rom an anchored boat I scanned the shore of East Island for albatross chicks. There were plenty to see. These largest of seabirds spend most of their lives far at sea, but at nesting time they concentrate ashore on remote islands like this one, at French Frigate Shoals in the Hawaiian Islands. Two albatross species, the Laysan albatross and the black-footed albatross, had hatched their chicks four or five months earlier.

I had not come to the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge to look for birds. I was looking for sharks—like the one whose fin showed where it was cruising a few yards from shore. These big tiger sharks show up at the peak of the fledging season, looking to eat young albatrosses lingering in the shallows. During the months of June and July the two separate worlds of bird and fish come together.

Oblivious to the danger, the 30 or 40 chicks knew only that their departure time was now. I watched as some of the birds caught the wind, sailed out clumsily over the water, gained momentum, and flew off into the wild blue yonder, safely beyond the danger zone. Others landed a mere 30 yards from shore, where the situation was wilder. A shark would move in and a hapless chick would disappear in a microsecond, before I could even raise my camera. These unfortunate birds, which were not in the majority, simply landed in the wrong place at the wrong time.



Tiger sharks routinely start feeding at twilight, but here they fed on albatross chicks all day. The morning of June 20 was a fairly typical one. Between 6:45 and 7:45 a.m. three Laysan and thirteen black-footed albatross chicks flew from

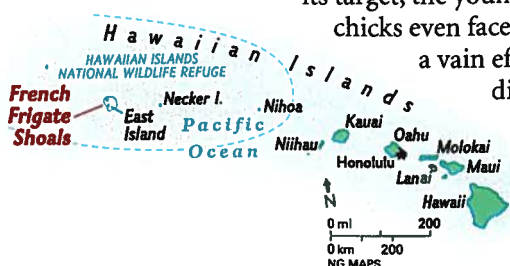
**T**wo species of albatrosses—Laysan (above) and black-footed—fledge at about five months. But when flying from sand to sea, they face a life-threatening hurdle—a hundred feet of water alive with tiger sharks, which migrate here each June to prey on the birds.

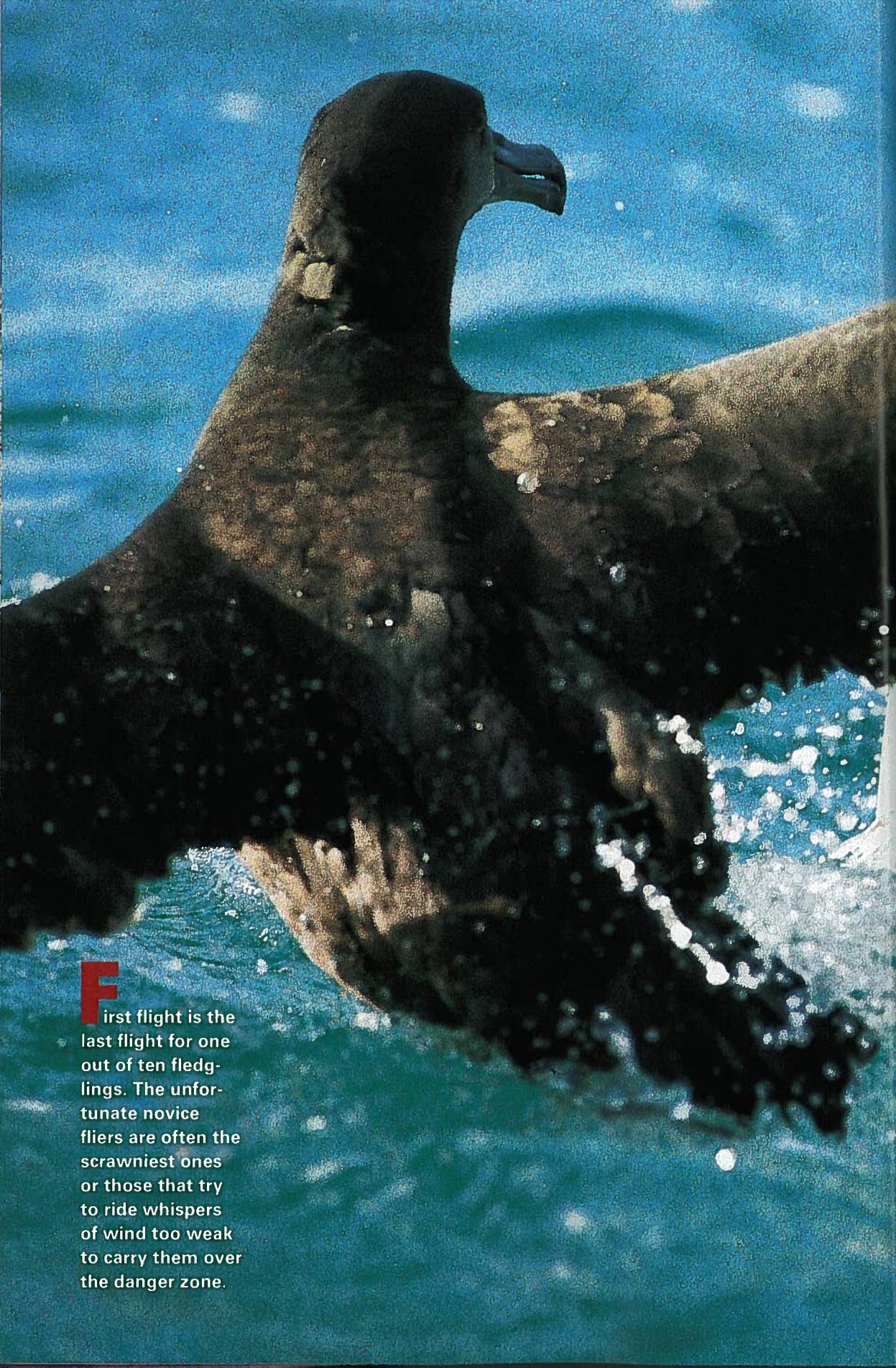
the beach at East Island. In that hour five of the sixteen fledglings were attacked and killed. Another was attacked and escaped. As the day progressed, more wind meant more flights. And the stronger winds gave the birds an extra edge, lofting them far offshore, beyond the danger zone. The victims would fly, splash down, and preen their wings, unaware of the danger until disaster struck.

The sharks were often not as efficient as one might expect. I saw them miss their prey by several feet on the first try, spiral around for another assault, and zoom in for the kill. Sometimes the chick would get away before the second attack. One distinctive shark with a knob on its dorsal fin wheeled around for a second pass. Not seeing the bird, it slammed into my small Boston Whaler and attacked the outboard propeller. This was discouraging since I prefer to dive with sharks to photograph the underwater action. Based on the behavior of this particular shark, I decided to use a remote camera system from topside.

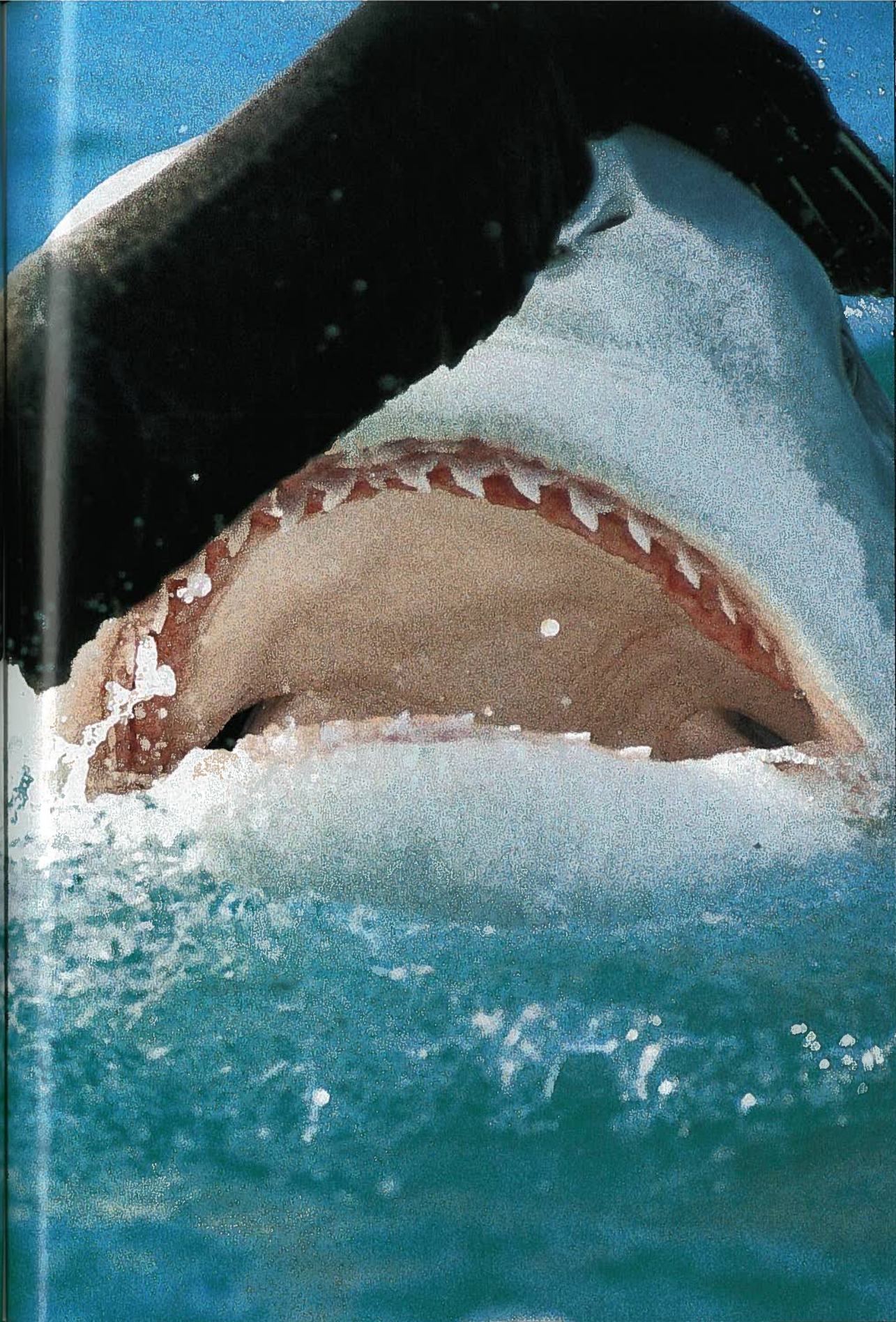
Even if a bird survived an initial attack because the shark missed its target, the young albatross would often stay on the water. Some chicks even faced their pursuer and feebly pecked at the shark in a vain effort to ward off the 14-foot predator. Then they disappeared, dragged underwater, swallowed whole.

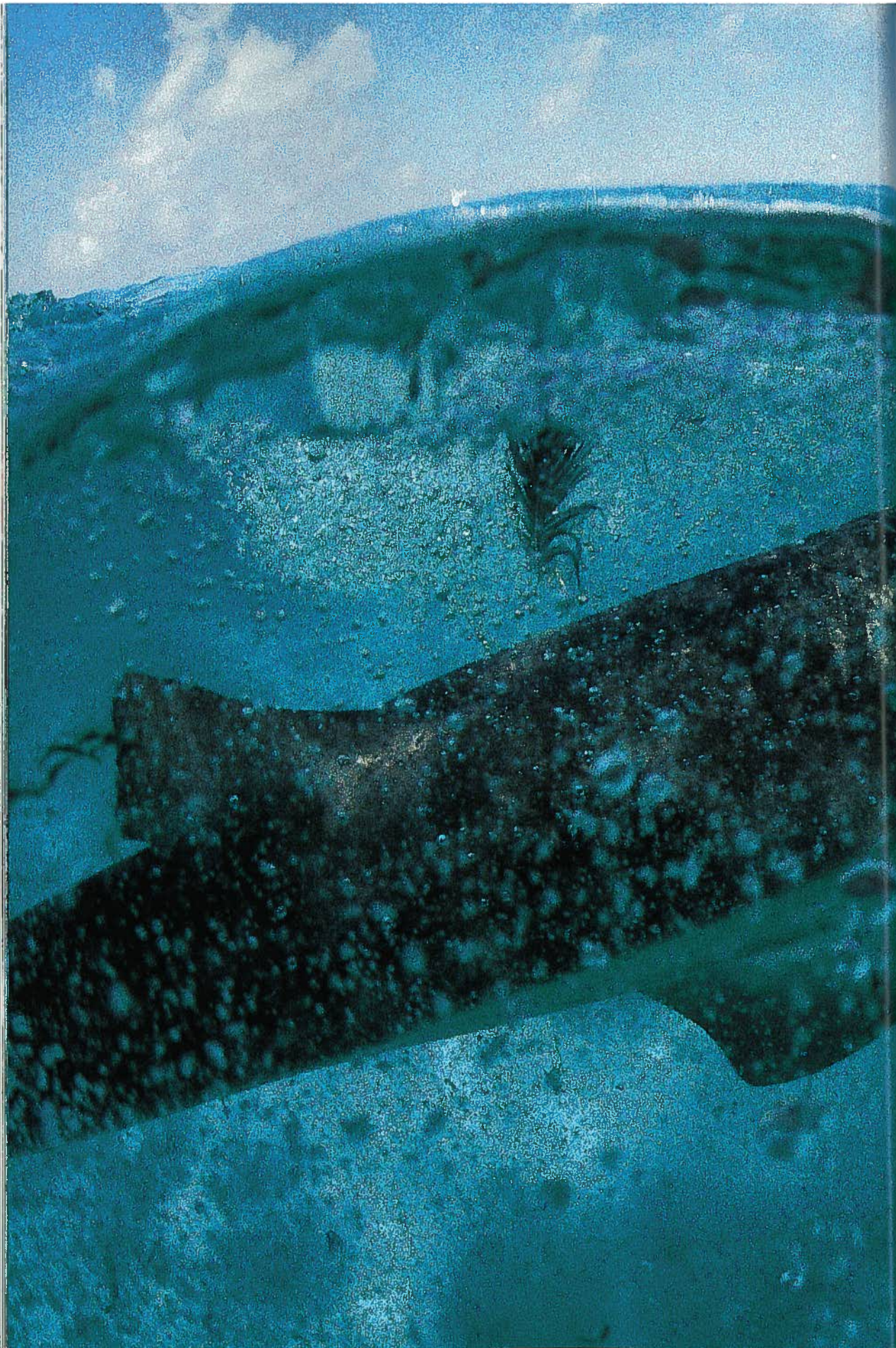
A few feathers remained drifting in the water along with bits of flesh that sank slowly to the bottom, erasing all evidence of the recent drama.





**F**irst flight is the last flight for one out of ten fledglings. The unfortunate novice fliers are often the scrawniest ones or those that try to ride whispers of wind too weak to carry them over the danger zone.







**F**eathers float in a tiger's wake, a familiar scene near albatross roosts. "It's rare to actually see sharks feeding in a natural setting like this," says photographer Curt-singer. "They were just snacking, but capturing this was a feast for me." □

Bill Curtsinger photographed "Pirates of the *Whydah*" for the May 1999 issue.



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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

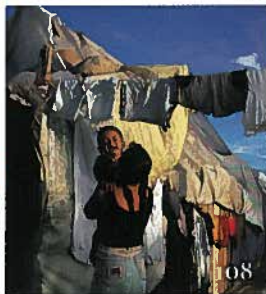
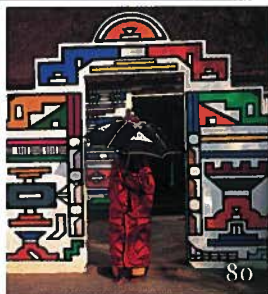
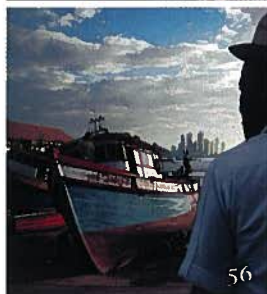
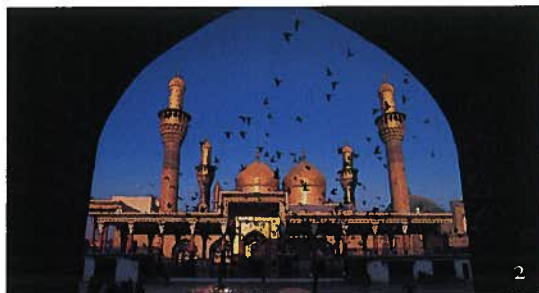
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## The Cover

*Clothing intact, this gold figurine was found with the exquisitely preserved mummy of an Inca boy sacrificed 500 years ago on an Andean peak in present-day Argentina. Photograph by Maria Stenzel*

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