

## Sardine Run

What has been one of those things that you've had a discussion with someone about and they've mentioned something that made you say "Ooooh, yes! Now that is something I'd like to experience one day!" For me, this would be capturing the chaos, and the calm of the annual sardine run, only from under the water.

The Sardine Run, one of nature's most spectacular events, is an awe-inspiring phenomenon that happens annually along South Africa's eastern coastline. Occurring between May and July, this event sees billions of sardines migrating from the cold waters of the Agulhas Bank to the warmer currents of the Indian Ocean, creating a feeding frenzy of marine predators in their wake. Witnessing it from the shores of Ballito this year was like watching a perfectly choreographed natural ballet, full of both chaos and calm. For photographers, both underwater and on land, the Sardine Run presents unparalleled opportunities to capture the raw beauty of nature in action.

I imagine being a wildlife photographer, equipped with underwater cameras, diving into the depths of this turbulent yet mesmerizing aquatic world. As the sardines swarm in silvery masses, their collective movement creates a shimmering curtain that ripples through the ocean like waves of liquid metal. I imagine this "bait ball" effect is visually stunning. Shoals of sardines moving in synchronized patterns, trying to avoid becoming a meal for hungry predators. The underwater world at that moment would be alive with tension, energy, and an overwhelming sense of survival.

Beneath the surface, as a photographer, I imagine capturing images of dolphins, sharks, and seabirds collaborating in a symphony of predation. I can picture Common dolphins, with their remarkable speed, rounding up the sardines into tighter formations, corralling them into smaller, more manageable "bait balls." Then, the feeding frenzy begins. Sharks, of all kinds, enter the scene, cutting through the water with a ferocity that's both terrifying and awe-inspiring. I picture their sleek bodies slicing through the bait balls, mouths wide open, catching whatever they can.

But it's not just the predators from below that join the feast. From above, Cape gannets (a lifer for both Luca and I from this trip) dive-bomb into the water at astonishing speeds, their wings folding back as they pierce the surface to snatch up sardines. The sight of these birds raining down like spears, breaking through the ocean's surface with such precision, is a moment of sheer beauty for photographers to capture. It was a pity neither Luca nor I had our cameras on the beach that day.

On land, experiencing the Sardine Run from the shores of Ballito, where I was, is an entirely different yet equally captivating experience. The frenzy of the Sardine Run often spills over onto the beaches as sardines wash ashore, pushed by predators forcing them closer to the coast. From the beach, you can see the ocean's surface bubbling and thrashing with activity. Seabirds swarm the skies, diving in perfect synchrony, while dolphins can be seen surfing the waves, their sleek bodies flashing through the water.

From the shore, watching the Sardine Run felt like a live nature documentary. While longing to be one of those photographers underwater getting the adrenaline rush, my on-land experience created a unique perspective. Here, I witnessed nature's balance of chaos and calm, predator and prey, and the incredible forces at play within the ocean's depths.

The thought of being beneath the waves has seen me add diving to my growing bucket list of life-changing experiences, where I can immerse myself in the ocean's depths, witness marine life up close, and capture the underwater world through my lens, forever deepening my connection with nature.