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Copepods, barnacles, decapod larvae and fish eggs are their main food and their enormous mouths allow them to filter more than 2,000 tonnes of water an hour.

Sharks are one of the most ancient vertebrate groups roaming the planet. Along with skates and rays they are mainly distinguished from other fish in having a cartilaginous rather than a bony skeleton. The earliest known sharks date from rocks about 400 million years old. Fossil basking sharks have been found in

Cretaceous rocks 70-100 million years old. The basking shark was first formally described by scientists in 1765 from a specimen taken near Norway.

The species is found worldwide, particularly in higher latitudes. It is widespread around New Zealand, including the subantarctic, but it is most commonly seen around Cook Strait and down the east coast of the South Island as far as Timaru. Most New Zealand sightings are between September and January.

*A basking shark feeding in water cloudy with plankton. As the shark swims – at about 2 knots with mouth wide open – the water passes through the gills which retain the plankton. Oxygen is absorbed from the water at the same time.*