

14. A CASE OF UNPROVOKED ATTACK BY A FISH ON A BOAT

(With a plate and a text-figure)

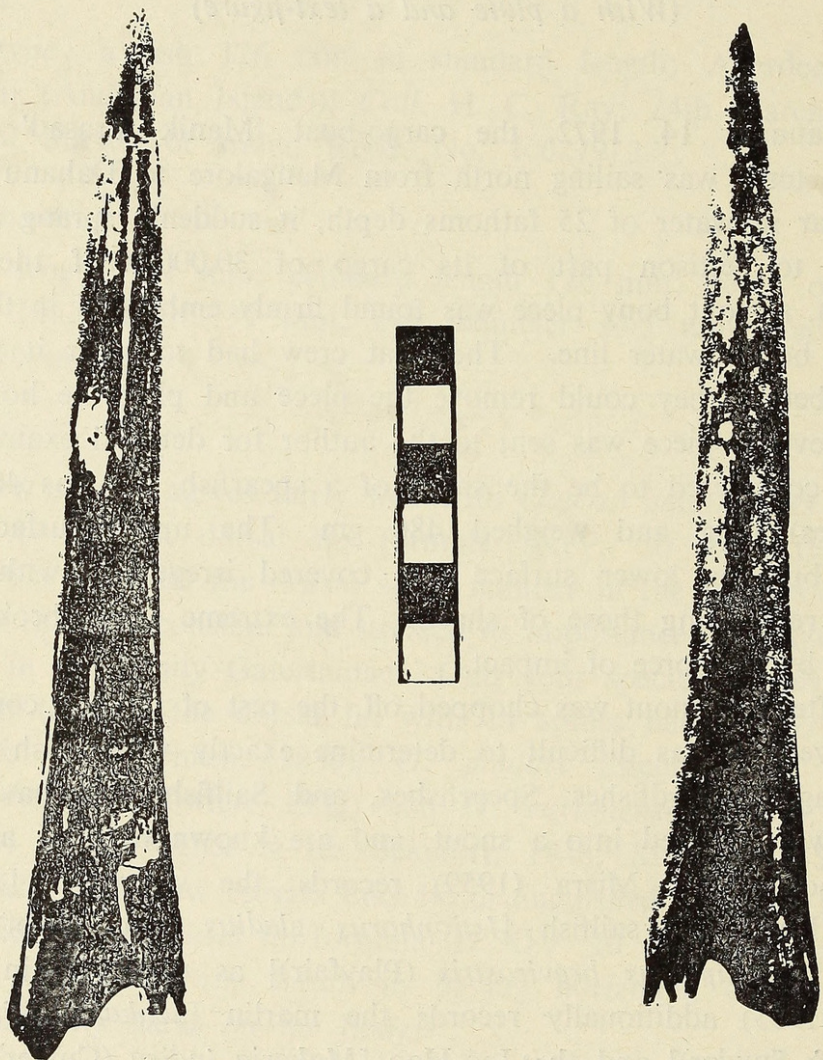
On January 14, 1972, the cargo-boat 'Manik Prasad' of 43 registered tons, was sailing north from Mangalore to Dahanu when, off Karwar in water of 25 fathoms depth, it suddenly sprang a leak, and had to jettison part of its cargo of 30,000 roof tiles. On inspection, a stout bony piece was found firmly embedded in the hull four feet below water line. The boat crew had to sever it with a chopper before they could remove the piece and plug the hole.

The severed piece was sent to the author for detailed examination and was considered to be the snout of a spearfish. It was 407 mm (16 inches) long and weighed 480 gm. The upper surface was smooth, but the lower surface was covered irregularly with white denticles resembling those of sharks. The extreme tip is broken off, probably by the force of impact.

As, after the snout was chopped off, the rest of the fish could not be retrieved, it was difficult to determine exactly which fish caused the damage. Swordfishes, Spearfishes, and Sailfishes all have their upper jaws produced into a snout, and are known to have attacked boats and ships. Misra (1959) records the swordfish [*Xiphias gladius* (Linnaeus)] sailfish [*Istiophorus gladius* (Broussonet)], and spearfish [*Tetrapturus brevirostris* (Playfair)] as occurring in India. Munro (1955) additionally records the marlin [*Makaira mitsukurii* (Jordan & Snyder)] and the Joo-Hoo [*Makaria indica* (Cuvier)] from Ceylon, and these two are also likely to occur in Indian seas. From the rounded cross-section of the snout, attack by Swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*) could be ruled out, as this fish has its snout flattened like a sword blade, giving the fish its name.

Stories of these fishes attacking boats are not uncommon. Thus, as early as 1674, Josselyn, in his 'Account of two voyages to New Zealand' wrote: 'and in the afternoon we saw a great fish called the Vehuella or Swordfish, having a long, strong and sharp fin, like a sword-blade on the top of its head, with which he pierced our ship, and broke it off with striving to get loose' [Quoted by Jordan & Evermann (1923, p. 293)]. Unfortunately, in most tales of such attacks, no attempt has been made to discriminate between swordfishes, spearfishes, and sailfishes. Schultz & Stern (1948, p. 54)

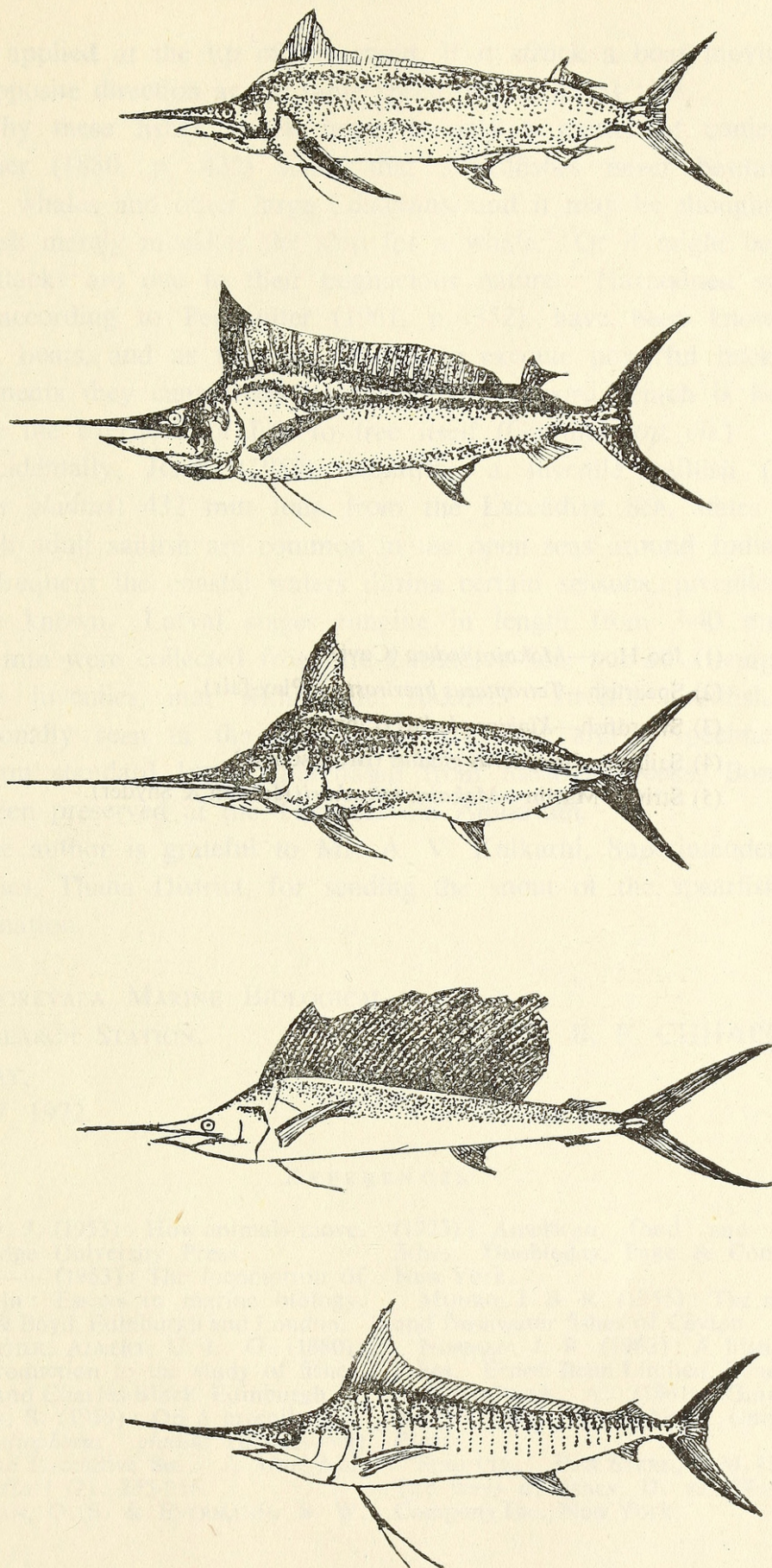
mention an incident involving an attack by a marlin on a Polynesian outrigger canoe at Swain's Island in the South Pacific. Authentic



Top (left) and bottom (right) views of snout of spearfish (?) broken off after encounter with a boat. Scale (middle) is in inches.

proof of such attacks is furnished by a piece of wood, thirteen and a half inches thick, from the bow of a whaler in which is impaled a 'sword' a foot in length and five inches in circumference, in the museum of the College of Surgeons, London, and a twenty-two inch thick piece of ship's timber with a transfixed snout in the British Museum [Norman (1963), p. 97].

Although attacks through such thick pieces of stout timber might indicate extreme strength and speed on the part of these fishes, Gray (1953) has calculated that it is only apparently so. Thus, for a swordfish weighing 600 lb. and travelling at ten miles per hour, the



For explanation, see reverse



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