

TARHEEL TUNA

FOR LATE-SEASON
YELLOWFIN ACTION,
HEAD FOR
NORTH CAROLINA'S
OUTER BANKS

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JOHN BROWNLEE



I'M NOT A HUGE FAN OF running at night in boats, so as we headed south from Pirate's Cove Resort, down North Carolina's Roanoke Sound toward Oregon Inlet in the predawn darkness, I made sure I had a firm grip on the T-top. It's not that I wasn't in good hands. Frank Adams, the owner of the 26 Regulator in which I was riding, is a veteran of the Outer Banks fishing scene. He had made this trip many times and had always managed to avoid wrapping himself or his boat around a channel marker.

I needn't have worried, because it turned out that we were hardly alone. A steady stream of boats heading for the inlet greeted us, and as we sped by the line of lumbering diesel sport-fishermen, a solid line of lights led straight to the inlet. All you had to do was connect the dots and hope these boats knew where *they* were going!

Such convoys are common during yellowfin tuna season, which runs most of the fall off the Outer Banks. My wife, Poppy, and I had come north at the invitation of Joan and Owen Maxwell, owners of Regulator Marine, to sample the fall yellowfin fishery for ourselves. "You have to pick your days because of weather," Owen said, "but winter yellowfin tuna fishing out of Oregon Inlet is some of the best, most dependable tuna fishing you will find anywhere." Who could pass up an offer like that?

Multiple hookups are common on North Carolina's Outer Banks during the late-fall yellowfin bite.



Rigged ballyhoo-and-SeaWitch combinations account for most of the yellowfin bites, although chunking can be equally effective at times.



EARLY STARTS KEY

We cleared Oregon Inlet as flocks of cormorants passed overhead, and soon we were headed east into a beautiful sunrise. Most anglers fish for yellowfin close to the 100-fathom curve, and since that means a boat ride of about 35 miles, it's best to get an early start. Fortunately, the strong winds that had kept most of the fleet on the beach the previous week had finally died down, and the seas had mostly subsided, with only a slight groundswell remaining. We were able to make great time to the fishing grounds.

The Maxwells had lined up two Regulators for our trip — Frank Adams' 26-footer and Owen's 32-footer. The calm seas allowed us to easily leave the slower charter fleet in our wake, and as the miles clicked off the GPS, the excitement level rose, as we knew we would be the first ones to the 100-fathom curve. I was with Adams and his friend Tom Dunston, who would serve as our mate for the day.

As we approached the grounds, we began to intently study the water color, not a particularly easy task in the dull, early-morning light with the sun still low on the horizon. Adams explained that the tunas seemed to prefer a specific kind of

SF TIP

ENTICE A STRIKE FROM WARY TUNA

When the yellowfin are reluctant to bite (yes, it even happens in North Carolina), try varying your presentation to encourage a strike. Ted Kramer says a spreader bar rigged with rubber squid will often do the trick. "Sometimes it seems like a spreader bar is the only rig they'll hit," he said. "When our SeaWitches and ballyhoos fail to produce, we break out the squid rigs, and they usually work." Kramer uses the spreader bar rigged with trailing hook bait, not just as a teaser.

It may be that the tunas have come across a large school of squid and are focused solely on that type of prey. Whatever the reason, it pays to be ready to quickly shift your trolling strategy to turn on a reluctant school of fish. Don't be afraid to try different types and styles of baits if one particular kind doesn't appear to be working well. By taking a diverse selection of baits offshore with you, your odds of success increase exponentially.

SF TIP

CASTING WITH CHUNKS

Trolling isn't the only way to catch yellowfin, of course. You may want to take a tuna on casting tackle. If so, you need to practice chunking, which is nothing more than attracting the school of fish to the boat by tossing cut chunks of baitfish into the water. Once you've got the attention of the fish, cast the lure or fly of your choice and you may get a strike.

With fly tackle, you often must cast the fly and let it drift back in the current at the same rate as the chunks to try to convince the tuna that your fly is simply another chunk. Jigs and lures cast on plug or spinning tackle must be retrieved, but it helps if they bear some general resemblance to whatever type of baitfish you've cut into chunks.

When chunking, be sure to keep a steady stream of chunks going, even while the angler is casting, to keep the school around the boat. Even a brief interruption in the stream of chunks can cause the tuna to leave.

water color. "Everybody around here looks for what the charter boys call 'blend-ed' water," he said. "The yellowfin don't like the green, inshore water, and they don't really like the bright blue Gulf Stream water, either. It seems they prefer the area where those two water colors meet, or blend."

Within a few miles of our destination, conditions began to change, as we spotted a few birds looking around but not diving. The farther we went, the more birds we saw, until we suddenly came upon three small groups of terns diving and darting at the water's surface. "Looks like as good a place as any to me," Adams declared. We were almost 35 miles east of Oregon Inlet and just inside the 100-fathom curve.

Dunston and I put the baits out as Adams followed the traveling birds. We watched the water temperature gauge closely, too, noting a steady reading of 71.0 degrees, occasionally 71.1. But after a few minutes, the gauge began to jump around — to 71.3, then 71.5. We knew we had found the edge we were looking for, and even in the bright morning light, a color change became evident.

The baits we deployed were reasonably simple, consisting mostly of medium-sized ballyhoo rigged on 6/0 or 7/0 J-hooks and trolled behind 30- and 50-pound conventional outfits. The SeaWitch remains an extremely popular skirt among ballyhoo draggers in the Carolinas, with Ilander Lures and rubber squid skirts a common choice as well. We pulled a wide variety during the day, but we kept coming back to a pink rubber squid daisy chain, and it was the first to produce.

FOLLOW THE BIRDS

We hadn't been trolling long when Adams made a turn to starboard to follow the wheeling terns. As soon as the boat came straight again, a long rigger line went off, and Dunston yelled, "Fish on!"



Simple is better, according to Outer Banks pros. One of the most popular combinations consists of a simple daisy chain of squid skirts run ahead of a rigged ballyhoo.

But before we could even grab that rod, three more rods had gone off, and we found ourselves hooked to a quadruple-header with only three guys in the boat!

Mercifully, one fish got off, so the three of us each took a rod and began to work the other three toward the boat. It was quite a ballet, as the lines would cross and we would scramble behind or in front of one another to clear them. But soon, Dunston's fish was at boat-side and Adams gaffed it, then ours came to the gaff in rapid succession. We had been trolling for 15 minutes or less and already had three school yellowfin in the boat.

About a half a mile away, the 32 Regulator was trolling on the opposite side of the birds, and we had no sooner landed our three fish than we heard a resounding shout from their direction. We looked up and saw three rods bent over with the 32's crew scrambling to grab them, and the bite was on! Over the next

several hours, we followed the birds, and each pass by the feeding terns would bring a strike, usually a multiple hookup like the first one. The fish averaged 25 pounds, but we did manage to take one that weighed in at a little over 40. Of course bigger fish are always possible. Later that same afternoon, we heard reports of a charter boat farther south that had landed a 65-pounder.

The crew on the 32 Regulator consisted of the Maxwells, Poppy, plus Ted Kramer and Brendan Strum, longtime friends of the Maxwells. Kramer is a professional captain who runs a private boat on the Outer Banks, a 64-foot Sonny Briggs named the *Ann Warrick*, for owner Chip Lacy. Kramer has years of experience fishing for yellowfin off Oregon Inlet and offered us some insight into the fishery.

"The yellowfin begin to show up in September," he explained, "and that's a really good time to fish for them because you still have a shot at catching a blue marlin in the same area." The fish typically stay off the Outer Banks until it gets really cold, then they leave. That could be as early as January or as late as March, but November and December make up the heart of the season. "Every year is different," Kramer adds.

Like many North Carolina captains, Kramer likes the SeaWitch. "On my long riggers, you'll almost always find a couple of SeaWitches, a black-and-purple and a light-blue-and-white, both in front of a rigged ballyhoo," he said. Kramer also likes Ilanders in those same colors, and he likes to use 7/0 tuna hooks set up with a slight offset because it increases his hookup percentage, he maintains.

ALL YELLOWFIN ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

The tuna off North Carolina behave quite differently from those I've encountered around where I live, in south Florida. I fish tuna in the Bahamas quite a bit, and they can be extremely wary and reluctant to strike at times. We often have to revert to light leader material, usually fluorocarbon, and scale back our presentation accordingly in hopes of encouraging a strike.

Not so with these Tarheel tuna. I've had the good fortune to fish for them on several different occasions, and each time they have shown a voracity seldom seen among their warmer-water brethren. Perhaps the colder water temperatures make them more active, but whatever the underlying cause, it makes for a truly exciting fishery. What could be better than yellowfin tuna that are both plentiful and eager to bite?



Most of North Carolina's fall yellowfin run school size, but larger fish in the 30-pound-and-up class are possible.

As the day progressed, it became harder to relocate the diving birds. When the strikes came, we would stop to fight the hooked fish, then rerig our baits and set off in search of the telltale flocks. The frenzied activity of the morning gave way

to an afternoon of hooking single fish randomly; the birds grew less and less active, finally settling on the water in large groups. Either the bite had turned off, or the fish had simply moved on. Whichever scenario was correct, both boats had more

WHERE TO STAY, HOW TO CHARTER

Whether you take your own boat or prefer to charter, the Outer Banks of North Carolina can accommodate you. It's hard to beat Pirate's Cove Resort and Marina a few miles north of Oregon Inlet in Manteo. Pirate's Cove has deluxe accommodations and dockage, and can also arrange charters, providing a soup-to-nuts fishing experience.

You can also book a charter boat out of the famous Oregon Inlet Fishing Center, located along Highway 12 on Bodie Island, at the north end of the Oregon Inlet Bridge. The Fishing Center is home to some of the best captains on the Outer Banks, and it's a cultural icon not to be missed.

PIRATE'S COVE RESORT & MARINA

Accommodations:

800-537-7245

www.pirates-cove.com

Fishing charters/Dockage:

800-367-4728

www.fishpiratescove.com

OREGON INLET FISHING CENTER

Charter reservations:

800-272-5199

www.oregon-inlet.com

than enough fish and a long ride ahead to get home. Those rides always seem easier to take with a full fish box somehow.

We experienced a fantastic morning of yellowfin tuna fishing, and what the fish lack in size, they make up for in willingness and cooperation. The North Carolina fleet uses relatively heavy tackle, but there's no apparent reason why you couldn't use lighter tackle to take these fish, if light tackle is your game. Sharks don't seem to be the problem they are in some other areas where yellowfin are abundant, so it's just a question of how much time you want to spend reeling them in.

No matter how you choose to fish for them, the fall and early-winter yellowfin off the Outer Banks provide lots of excitement and action. When the weather begins to cool after a long, hot summer, I know things off Oregon Inlet will just be starting to heat up, and that's why I find myself drawn there again and again. If you like great fishing, beautiful surroundings and truly friendly people, it could be just the place you've been looking for, too. 🐟

SF TIP

BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR BONUS SPECIES

While yellowfin tuna dominate the 100-fathom curve in the fall and early winter off the Outer Banks, they are by no means the only angling possibility. As Ted Kramer pointed out, early in the season a blue marlin encounter remains possible. As the weather cools and fall arrives, the marlin will leave, but other species show up.

The bluefin tuna often appear in December, and although they are normally found much closer to shore than yellowfin, a chance bluefin bite is always a possibility. The same holds true for bigeye tuna.

Although 30-pound-test rods are perfect for the school yellowfin we were catching, you might want to take along a 50 or even an 80, rigged and ready to go, in case one of the yellowfin's larger cousins makes an appearance. Chances are the bite would come on your lighter tackle, already deployed for the yellowfin. But having a heavier rod ready will allow you to quickly get a bait into the water and have a shot at a second bluefin or bigeye. Where there's one, there's bound to be more.