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*Tuna on fly —  
the sort of thing that can bring a grown man to his knees*

# Tuna Tech

By Carter Andrews

Fishing blitzing schools of false albacore is a great way to practice for larger species of tuna such as blackfin, bluefin and yellowfin.



**Nothing that swims** in the ocean or in an angler's dreams can compare to a monster tuna tethered to a fly rod. Pound for pound, no fly-caught fish can match the raw power of a tuna, and truth be told, nothing puts more of a strain on angler and tackle alike.

Starting with the bite, tunas command respect; it sometimes seems that these brutes were created to bring grown men to their knees and make blubbing fools of the most seasoned fly-rodders. These fish are built for speed and everlasting endurance. To catch one on the fly requires an epic force of will and sheer strength, and though I hate to admit it, these slab-sided brawlers win more often than not.

Fortunately, different varieties of tuna are widely available,

affording anglers ample opportunities to hone their skills before taking on a true monster. Blackfin, yellowfin and bluefin tuna (listed in ascending order) are considered the heavyweights, but let's not forget about false albacore, bonita and skipjack. All of these species offer tremendous opportunities for fly-rodders, but for simplicity's sake, I'm breaking my suggested methods down and will cover tuna in the small, medium, large and supersize categories.

**SMALL**

**LESSONS WITH LIGHTWEIGHTS FALSE ALBACORE**

[ Hot Spot → mid-Atlantic ]  
[ Local Expert → Capt. Brian Horsley; email here ]

→ Up and down the East Coast, opportunities abound for smaller tuna species. False albacore (albies) rank as one of the most pursued and maintain a loyal following. Albies are inshore firecrackers, and though they are considered an apex game species in their own right, they make ideal sparring partners for tuna anglers training for heavyweight fights farther offshore. Small baitfish patterns cast on rods in the 7- to 9-weight range



matched with floating or intermediate lines are the standard tools for this game. Small, shallow-draft bay boats should be all you need to get into marauding packs of fish, and believe it or not, shore-based opportunities exist as well. When you hit it right, the

spectacle of a feeding school will not soon be forgotten. Keep an eye out for lots of bird activity and acres of white water erupting as the albacore slash through tightly packed baitballs. The Outer Banks of North Carolina is perhaps the best-known albie hot spot

FROM TOP: BRIAN HORSLEY; BRIAN GROSSENBACHER; OPPOSITE: FROM TOP: BRIAN GROSSENBACHER, JOHN MCMURRAY; ILLUSTRATIONS: DIANE PEEBLES; PREVIOUS SPREAD: BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

and makes a perfect starting point in your quest for big tuna. Plan your mid-Atlantic trips around the fall months to take advantage of prime time. Albie fishing tends to be a high-volume game when it's on, so expect a lot of action; the cast, the strip, the hook-set, the clearing of the line and the fight are all translatable to larger tuna, so bring your A-game. Fall albie fishing tends to require a "run-and-gun" approach, and inshore waters of the mid-Atlantic often have many anglers chasing the same schools, so be prepared for a little competition. In general, be courteous to the other anglers, and do not run over the schools of fish you are targeting. If you are quick on the draw, polite and willing to strip a fly faster than you ever thought possible, you'll get a good taste for the fast and furious game that lies in store offshore.



In the Florida Keys, blackfin and skipjack tuna as well as false albacore (little tunny) feed in the same frenzies.

**MEDIUM**

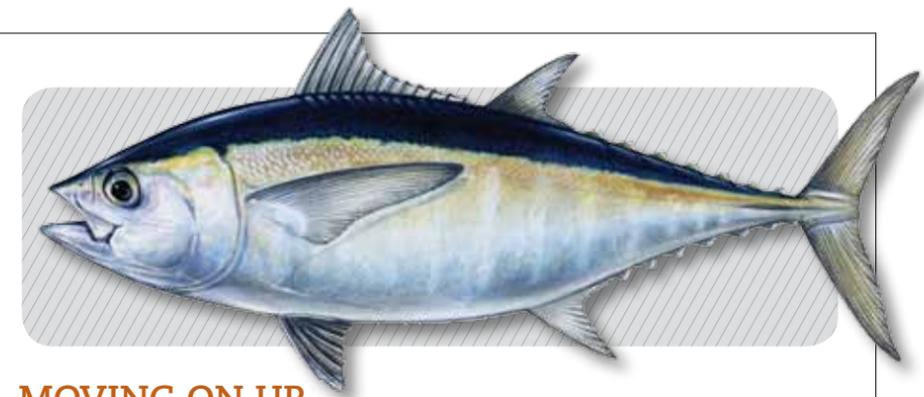
**MOVING ON UP BLACKFIN TUNA**

[ Hot Spot → Florida Keys ]  
[ Local Expert → Capt. Brian Cone; email here ]

→ When you are ready to put your newly gained skills honed on mid-Atlantic false albacore to the test, consider heading south to the Florida Keys to target 30-plus-pound blackfin tuna. Fishing around offshore structure or following shrimp boats in the Gulf are two effective tactics that top captains use to locate schools. Whatever the method, blackfin action is often fast and furious. Without a doubt, some of my favorite fly-fishing takes place offshore and is done by chumming with live bait. The use of chummers has been mastered in the Keys and seems to be most effective during the fall. Pinnacles just offshore called "humps" rise to within 100 feet of the surface – underwater structures like this are perfect spots to chum using live pilchards. In my experience, when this tactic is carried out properly, success is a given. Once any tuna responds to live chum, things accelerate quickly. The adrenaline really starts to flow when you see bait fleeing and tuna slashing all within 25

to 30 yards of the boat. When the blackfin get moving in the Keys, you will also find bonita, a slightly smaller species. Both bonita and blackfin are a great size for advancing tuna fly-rodders. The added benefit to fishing in the Keys, particularly Key West, is the presence of commercial shrimpers. The bycatch that the shrimpers shovel overboard creates feeding frenzies that will get any aspiring tuna angler's blood pumping.

I will never forget a day I spent filming and fishing with *Salt Water Sportsman* editor John Brownlee. We set out for blackfins on the humps off Marathon, and we had a couple thousand pilchards in the livewells. When we started throwing chum, the water literally erupted with tuna. We had schools of eight- to 15-pounders behind the boat all day long (including a few 20-pound bruisers), and they were more than eager to eat any appropriately sized pilchard pattern we could throw. In the end, we were worn out before the blackfins turned off.



**BEATING BLUEFIN**

Prepare for a painful but rewarding battle.

Yellowfin tuna aren't the only species that reach the monster class; there are bluefin tuna swimming in our oceans that exceed 1,000 pounds. The cooler waters from North Carolina to New England offer the best opportunities for these fish. Smaller, schoolie bluefin can be taken with the run-and-gun approach that works so well on albies, and indeed these fish can be found close to shore midsummer through fall.

The IGFA world record bluefin on fly is 196 pounds, and the fish was bested on 20-pound line. That's an outstanding fish on conventional gear but should be considered a true leviathan on fly gear. Take a minute and consider the last really big fish you caught on a fly. Now, multiply the size, strength, speed and power by 10 — now you're getting the idea of what it takes to land a jumbo.



A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a visor, is smiling and holding a large blackfin tuna. He is holding the fish by its head and tail, with a fishing hook visible in the tail. The background is a bright blue sky with some light clouds. The fish is the central focus, showing its silver scales and dark fins.

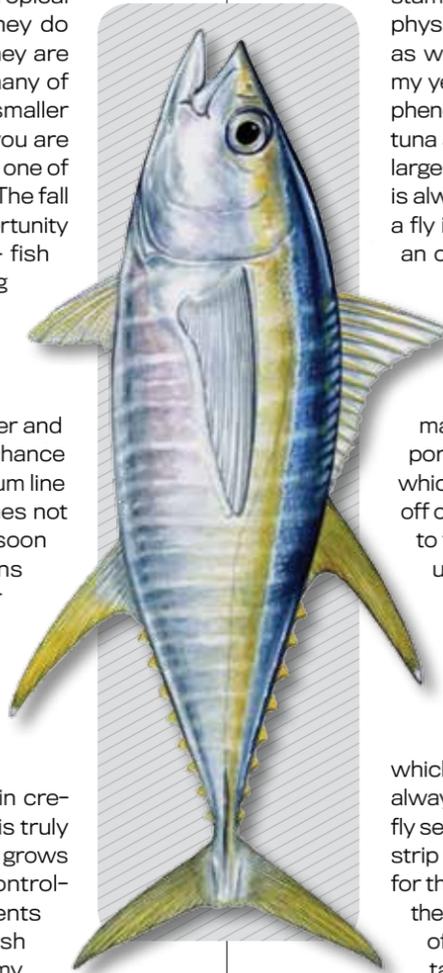
*Though blackfin tuna don't grow to the supersize proportions, pound for pound, they put up one hell of a fight and test the tackle and skill of any angler.*

## KICKING IT UP A NOTCH YELLOWFIN TUNA

[ Hot Spot → Venice, Louisiana ]

[ Local Expert → xxx; email here ]

→ After graduating from blackfin school, the logical next step in the tuna progression is to try your hand at yellowfin. Yellowfin are widely distributed in tropical and subtropical waters, and though they do not reach the size of the bluefin tuna, they are notorious tackle busters. Once again, many of the same fly-rod techniques used for smaller tunas should be applied to yellowfin. If you are up for the challenge, Venice, Louisiana, is one of the very best places in the States to go. The fall shrimping season provides the best opportunity for fly-anglers to tangle with yellowfin – fish that can reach 200 pounds. While seeing fish of this caliber is an unbelievable visual experience, in terms of fly-fishing, fish ranging from 40 to 80 pounds are ideal. Make no mistake, smaller fish like this will unquestionably test any angler and his tackle, but there remains a plausible chance of success. Free-casting a fly into the chum line created by a shrimper's bycatch becomes not a question of "what if?" but "when?" As soon as the bycatch hits the water, yellowfins race through the buffet and the water comes to life with glimpses of silver, blue and yellow. This is always the most exciting time for me: moments before the cast, when I can watch the tuna feed. Whether they are working the wake of a shrimp boat or harassing a school of bait offshore, feeding yellowfin create a visual unlike any other in fishing. It is truly awesome to see, and the anticipation that grows as the adrenaline flows is all but uncontrollable. Sometimes when I'm putting clients onto feeding schools of yellowfin, the fish are so large that I'm actually afraid for my guests to cast. When they do hook up, the chances are good that they've never heard their reel sing in such a high octave. This is when it's fun and games – when it comes time to wench the fish to the boat is when playtime is over and the real work begins.



## THE MAIN EVENT MONSTER YELLOWFIN TUNA

[ Hot Spot → Panama ]

[ Local Expert → Capt. Carter Andrews; carter@carterandrewsfishing.com ]

→ The 100-plus-pound tuna on fly takes an angler into an entirely different class. The weight, bodily profile, power and stamina of these fish make the battle not only physical, but a tremendous mental challenge as well. In Panama, where I spend the bulk of my year, we are fortunate to witness a special phenomenon that aids in our success: yellowfin tuna and porpoise working in tandem to hunt in large packs as they cruise the ocean. Though it is always best to locate a baitball and free-cast a fly into a feeding pod of tuna, it is not always an option. When baitballs don't materialize, a bait-and-switch is an excellent option. After locating a school of porpoise, I position my boat in front of them. Typically, the tuna are traveling in front of and below the porpoise. I'll have my mate cast a hookless popper ahead of the porpoise and work it fast and aggressively, which normally results in multiple tuna peeling off of the school. Once this happens, it's then up to the fly-angler to cast a five- to seven-inch unweighted baitfish pattern in line with the retrieved popper. At this point, the angler will need to strip long and fast in order to mimic the action of the popper. When the plan comes together, one or more tuna will generally peel off the popper and devour the fly. Because of the speed at which the tuna are chasing the popper, it is not always easy to feel the take, and many times the fly seems to disappear. When this happens, a big strip and a sweep of the rod is usually enough for the hook to find its way home. The sweep of the rod can be important, in large part because of the way the tuna feeds. Once the fish has taken the artificial, he continues to travel along the line he is swimming, maintaining course and speed. Many times, the acceleration caused by the rod sweep moves the line just enough to initiate tension, thereby burying the hook point. Come tight, clear the line, and in no time, you will find yourself harnessed to a freight train.

### ARMING YOURSELF

Don't bring a knife to a gunfight.

I cannot stress the importance of your tackle when hunting larger tunas. Reels with proper drags, rods capable of extreme lifting power, fly lines with heavy inner cores and leaders of more than enough test strength to withstand epic battles are all a must. Big tuna are known to ruin tackle — if you want a big one in the boat, then overdo it. Gear up for battle. It is always better to celebrate over sashimi than over a pile of graphite shrapnel and a story about the one that got away.



TOSH BROWN; OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT: BRIAN HORSLEY; BRIAN GROSSENBACHER (2); ILLUSTRATION: DIANE PEEBLES



Finding schools of bait is a good sign that tuna are nearby, but catching bait to use as chum offshore will often bring the tuna to you.

for the old bait-and-switch with the hookless popper. I positioned the boat, and my mate fired off a 300-footer and began ripping the popper across the surface. Fish were piling onto the teaser — six, eight, 10 fish at a time. Heidi

### TRAINING PAYS OFF

It is not often that I get to have my wife, Heidi, on the boat for a day's fishing, and even more rare is when I can talk her into chasing big yellowfins on fly tackle. One day this past season, I twisted her arm into agreeing. Heidi, photographer Brian Grossenbacher and I set out on another perfect day off Islas Secas, Panama, where I spend most of the year. The tuna schools had been thick all season, and Grossenbacher and I were fully prepared for an epic day. Heidi, on the other hand, seemed uncertain. Though we'd been working steadily through a tuna curriculum for several years, she'd heard countless stories of my fly-angling clients waging torturous battles with these back breakers. In the name of domestic welfare, I promised her that we'd look for some fish on the smaller end of the spectrum — which we did. The east side of Montuosa was thick with tuna and porpoise schools. The birds were working and the tuna were blowing up on scattered clusters of flying fish, creating idyllic conditions

stood in the bow with line stripped on the deck at her feet. Her first couple of shots came up short but we shouted encouragement; after all, it's no small feat to throw a 15-weight when you know that the goal is to have it ripped out of your hands! Heidi, never having been the type to back down, made a perfect cast on her next attempt, and from the tower I could see a dozen 50- to 60-pound yellowfin hot on the popper. It was absolutely textbook. The popper passed the fly, Heidi stripped hard, and half of the pod peeled away from the popper. Somewhere in the ensuing melee, Heidi's rod tip jerked hard to the water. The reel screamed, and she did too, once she found herself attached to her best-ever tuna on fly. This was the moment of truth, and thanks to having trained for it, she was ready for it. The battle lasted no more than 20 minutes, and once the fish was on ice, she looked up at me, victoriously raised her fist in the air and shouted "How about we go do that again!" Needless to say, I was more than willing to oblige.



The author shows off his wife's hard-earned prize — a healthy Panamanian yellowfin tuna.