

Salt Water SPORTSMAN

Tuna-licious!
Tasty tuna fishing awaits anglers off North Carolina's Oregon Inlet

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By Ric Burnley

After trolling all morning through roller-coaster seas, Capt. Jason Snead spotted a school of yellowfin tuna 100 yards off the bow. "There they are!" he shouted over the wind whipping through the fly bridge of his 58-footer. I looked to where Snead was pointing and saw a squadron of dark blue torpedoes cruising down the face of a 6-foot wave.

Snead cranked the wheel hard to the right, lumbered over a huge roller and turned to intercept the inbound tuna. Behind us, 10 lines crossed into a web of monofilament and straightened again, bringing an armada of SeaWitches skipping across the surface. We watched the lures and waited. Just when I was about to give up hope, I noticed a boil behind the bait trailing from the right long rigger. The clip on the outrigger snapped, and an International by my right hand screamed. Snead jumped from the helm to the reel, cranked the line tight and handed the rod to mate Brad Diaz in the cockpit, who passed it to a waiting angler in the fighting chair. Snead continued to troll until two more rods went down and two more anglers were hooked up. After he slowed the boat, the rest of us rod-yanked the lines to jig the drifting SeaWitches. I was jigging two baits like a crazed puppeteer when the line in my right hand snapped tight, followed by the line in my left, and both reels announced that we had hooked two more tuna.

By now, each angler was fighting a fish, and there were two more rods awaiting attention. As soon as the first 50-pound yellowfin came aboard, Diaz handed the angler another rod bent to the hilt. The guy's face proved that a physical beating could be a whole lot of fun.

Sushi Bar

Once the fish were boxed, Snead turned into the wind, and Diaz reset the lines to meet another band of tuna gliding through the clear, green water.

Snead admitted that fishing for yellowfin tuna off Oregon Inlet isn't always this good, but when the bite is on, crews have a good chance of experiencing fast action on big tuna.

Here's the best part: The action is often within 40 miles of the inlet, where there are two keys to finding fish: structure and water temperature. "A good way to start is by looking at a satellite water-temperature map and finding where the Gulf Stream crosses the 100-fathom line," says Snead.

Snead also looks for color changes, temperature breaks, weed lines, whales, porpoises and feeding birds. Many times, he marks bait and fish on his fish finder and then works the area until the tuna get hungry and come to the surface. "After we run 20 miles and mark bait and fish, we'll stop the boat and start fishing," says Snead.

Flying fish can be a good tuna indicator but bad news for fishermen. When yellowfin are feeding on big fliers, they are hard to fool with trolled baits. That's when Snead



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dangles a Yummi flying fish from a kite. When the water is hot and clear, he'll switch to longer, lighter leaders and fish his baits way back behind the boat. "Sometimes we use as much as 60 or 70 feet of 100-pound leader and drop the bait 400 to 600 feet behind the boat," says Snead.

Truth is, our big day started out slow, and it took Snead several hours and many miles before we saw our first fish. But once we found them and they decided to eat, the action was on, and we had a bite every few minutes. "I've never seen anything like this," Snead said, "the fish are just wandering around like they're lost."

Tuna Sea witch

Watching bands of yellowfin wander around like they were lost was amazing, but watching these tuna chase down a bait was awesome. Some crashed the SeaWitch with authority while others struck two or three times before getting the hook. Several fish jumped clear of the water and pounced on the bait, and one tuna even knocked the SeaWitch out of the water and caught it in mid-air. Each attack brought oohs and ahhs from the cockpit as we watched the tuna unleash their speed and power on the skipping lures.

With lines going down and tuna coming over the gunwales one after another, Snead performed an impressive plate-spinning act in the cockpit. Jason kept him busy by milking every knockdown, turning each into at least two or three more bites. This is an exciting way to hook a big yellowfin, but Snead warned us to be careful to keep the line from wrapping around the reel or our fingers. "That would be the end of the fun," he joked.

Tuna Salad

Depending on the time of year, anglers fishing off Oregon Inlet can expect to see a variety of tunas. Yellowfin, bluefin, even bigeye and blackfin ride the Gulf Stream past Hatteras Island. From one day to the next, crews never know what they'll find when they put out their baits.



Last winter, the fleet was able to score 80- to 100-pound bluefin almost at will. "That was a fluke," Snead says, "we had pretty water, and the fish were on the break all winter."

Snead says that bigeye tuna are always a possibility, but never a guarantee. He says the best time to run into one of these beasts is on the full moon. "They seem to hang around ledges," he added, "and when you hook one, you'll usually hook two or three others at the same time."

When the skippers can't find other species to catch, they can usually rely on blackfins that school up

over wrecks and rockpiles. These fish are particularly susceptible to pink-and-white SeaWitches trolled 100 feet behind a #8 or #12 planer. The only problem with such good tuna fishing is that the three-fish-per-person limit can be met in no time flat. On this trip, no one was complaining — the crew had a blast! As for Snead and Diaz, they knew more tuna-filled days were to come.



Tuna School

With a short run to the Gulf Stream and a variety of species to target, the waters off Hatteras Island offer weekend warriors an opportunity to fish like the big boys. Capt. Jimmy Hillsman — a pro mate and instructor for the Outer Banks Fishing School — suggests running seven lines and pulling a variety of baits. First, he deploys SeaWitch skirts with 50-pound tackle on the long riggers and short riggers. He reserves one flat line for an 80-pound combo connected to an Ilander or a Hawaiian Eye Jr. and horse ballyhoo. The other flat line hosts another 50-pound outfit pulling a naked ballyhoo. Down the middle of the spread he pulls a spreader bar if he's targeting yellowfin, or another Ilander for bigger tuna or blue marlin. Hillsman suggests trolling around 7 knots when there is little current. He sets the baits far enough back for them to get optimal performance. "I like to see my baits swimming more than skipping across the surface," Hillsman says. When the fish are finicky, Hillsman drops the baits farther back. When they are snapping, he pulls the spread in closer to elicit more bites.



Where: Oregon Inlet, North Carolina
When: Year-round
What: Yellowfin, bluefin, blackfin and bigeye tuna on the edge of the Gulf Stream.
Sleep: Tar Heel Motel
Nags Head, North Carolina 252.441.6150
Access: Free launch ramp at Oregon Inlet Fishing Center.
Eat: FatBoyz Grill
Nags Head, North Carolina 252.441.6514
Learn: OBX Fishing School
252.255.2004
www.obxfishingschool.com

Rods: 50- to 80-pound-test tackle.
Rigs: SeaWitches, Spreader Bars, #12 and #8 Planers, Ilanders.
Baits: Plenty of both medium and larger "horse" ballyhoo.
Line: 80-pound test on the 50s, 100-pound test on the 80s.
Leader: 48 to 60 feet of 100- to 200-pound-test monofilament.
Who: Captain Jason Snead
Dream Girl Charters
252.255.8037
www.dreamgirlcharters.com
Oregon Inlet Fishing Center
800.272.5199
www.oregon-inlet.com