

## Summer Bluefin Tuna off the Mid-Atlantic Coast

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### Charter Boat HOOKED UP II

I would like to begin with a little bit about our history of inshore fishing for Bluefin Tuna. We first started fishing for Bluefin out of Lewes, DE and Ocean City, MD over 20 years ago. We usually began fishing for Bluefin in late June or early July chunking with butterfish in the famous Jack Spot area along with what seemed like the whole Ocean City, MD fleet. We rarely trolled because we found trolling with artificial lures such as feathers or cedar plugs produced mostly small, football sized Bluefin and with chunking we caught bigger Bluefin in the 50-80 pound range. During this time, we began experimenting to see if we could find any Bluefin on the unnamed lumps that are on most charts to the north of the Jack Spot. We also thought by trolling we could cover more lumps plus look for bait that might hold tuna much like the Jack Spot. So we tried trolling using all the traditional early season methods with artificial lures up in the water column but we did not have much success until we made one major change in our trolling spread. The change we made was we started using cedar plug daisy chains close in the wash behind our boat as teasers and behind them Ilander Trackers with medium ballyhoo. It did not seem to matter what color Ilander we used as long as the bally did not spin or wobble. We rigged all our ballyhoo using standard pin rigs on regular 180 pound test mono leaders. I forget now what size and type hook we used then but in recent years we've used the 8/0 7691 DT Southern Style Tuna hook for summer bluefin trolling. Blue/White was their favorite Ilander color and probably produced more Bluefin in the 45-70 pound range than any of the other colors although purple, black, red, blue and combinations of these colors all worked fine on many days. We trolled at around 6.2 knots and had no problem getting bites at that speed. This was long before we started using planers and the wwwwwwwb (way back) technique we now use. We didn't have bluefish problems trolling back then possibly because the baits were up near the surface. We found quite a few lumps north of the Jack Spot that held bait (sand eels) and Bluefin tuna but never in large concentrations. We had little success chunking these lumps but were able to catch nice Bluefin on the troll over the years.

We now start our first inshore trips of the season for Bluefin out of Cape May on these same unnamed lumps. We had a great in-shore Bluefin season in 2007 beginning with our first troll trip in early July when we had a good number of Bluefin between 46-53 inches using #32 planers with two baits wwwwwwwb. These un-named lumps and hills don't produce the size and numbers of Bluefin tuna as the more traditional locations such as such as Massey's, the Hambone, Sausages, Hot Dog or behind a scallop boat but they do offer some pretty decent inshore tuna fishing with Bluefin up to 80 pounds without the wall to wall boat congestion found at the more popular locations. One of the reasons we prefer trolling is a hill may have fish one day but not the next yet within a few miles we often are able to find a new hot spot on another hill where the bait moved. By trolling we cover more ground and increase our chances of finding the fish. We have found that day scallop boats will shut down a location once they start working a hill due to the bottom disturbance they cause which causes the bait to move to another location. When we see a day scalloper, we pretty much avoid trolling anywhere near where they are working and move to other lumps away from them. This does not hold true for the scallop boats that are out for extended days that are allowed to collect thousands of pounds of scallops per trip and shuck large quantities of scallops on board and dump the guts overboard. This free lunch often attracts

Bluefin to the scallop boat within a few days. Last season in late August and September when the scallop boats with the larger quotas were allowed to scallop in our area, they attracted Bluefin in good numbers with some weighing over 200 pounds. We use very heavy tackle when we fish behind scallop boats and do it mostly from 2:00 am until 5:00 am as we like to fish without any other boat traffic around. On the nights that we caught our biggest Bluefins of the 2007 season, the boats that arrived after 5:30 a.m. missed the bite as it was pretty much over by then. The bite turned on once again at sundown and lasted until about 4:00 am and then it was over for the day. We were lucky that our mate is good friends with one of the scallop boat captains and his captain friend let us know when he had tuna behind his boat. This made it a little easier for us as we did not have to go running around trying to find a scallop boat that had tuna. We have not always been this lucky and in some years we had to explore around a good number of scallop boats to try to find ones that were holding tuna with both good and bad results. Sometimes it is just a big waste of fuel trying to find a scallop boat that has fish behind it. We only fish this way a few a times a year although our biggest Bluefin of the 2007 season out of Cape May, NJ came from behind a scalloper in late August at 3:30 a.m. only 42 miles from the inlet. Some very nice Bluefin were caught a little later in September by boats that stopped behind the scallop fleet inside the Lindy and Toms on their way back from overnight canyons trips. One of our friends caught a Bluefin that dressed out at 226 pounds so there were some nice fish caught last year by a few boats we know of but these boats all had first hand information from scallop boat captains or owners. When fishing for Bluefin behind scallop boats, we use bent butt 80's with 130 pound Spectra with mono top shots with 6 feet of 150 pound Fluorocarbon leader and a Mustad 39965D 14/0 circle hook crimped to the leader. We fight all the bigger Bluefin from swivel rod holders in the stern with at least 28-36 pounds of drag and use a 14 foot harpoon in lieu of a gaff on the Bluefin we are boating. By using the swivel rod holders and bent butt 80's, we can get a 200 pound Bluefin to the boat in 15 minutes. This gives the Bluefin we release (after we have caught our legal limit) a much better chance of survival than if there is long fight even though it is much sportier to fight one of these fish stand-up with less drag. We also use the heavy drags to quickly move the tuna away from the scallop boat's gear to prevent the line getting cut off. Fishing this way is not IGFA legal for tournaments but for everyday charter fishing it does produce some very nice sized Bluefin. Extreme caution should be exercised when fishing around or behind a scallop boat especially at night. These boats are out making a living and impeding them while they are dragging is absolutely wrong plus it can be extremely dangerous to you and your boat. Fishing with tackle that is too light can result in the tuna running and getting caught in the scallop boat's underwater gear which almost always results in losing the fish. It seems that within seconds after a good sized Bluefin takes the bait, it heads right for the scallop boat's running gear as if it has internal radar telling it where to go to cut you off. Therefore, we put the heat to them and power the boat as fast as we can to get the tuna away from the scallop boat. Once we get 100 yards or so away, we actually start fighting the fish. This is one of the reasons we prefer fishing behind the scallop boats in the middle of the night when, hopefully, there are no other boats around that the tuna can run under and get caught up in props or lines. I am not sure if the scallop season will be open this summer for the multi-day boats that hold the big Bluefin. The season varies each year and all the scallop boats have quotas and locations that they have to adhere too.

Things have really changed for us over the years when it comes to fishing for inshore Bluefin. The first change was back in the late 90's after we started fishing in the winter for giant Bluefin out of Morehead City, NC and learned the technique of using #24 and #32 planers for trolling for

giant Bluefin. We used the large 9 inch Ilanders with large or horse ballyhoo on 10/0-11/0 7691 hooks with heavy mono leaders as there were lots of Bluefin around and they were not especially leader shy back then. Based on our experience in North Carolina, we started using the same method of trolling with planers up north in the summer months even though the bluefin are much smaller than the Morehead City, NC tuna. We found that getting the troll baits down deeper in the water column worked off the mid-Atlantic coast as well as in North Carolina. Once we started trolling with planers, we began to catch Bluefin over 100 pounds on a pretty regular basis. For many years we trolled only until about the second week of July and then converted solely to chunking with deep lines right off the bottom. Chunking was the tried and true method of catching Bluefin for us and we probably caught 95% of our bluefin this way from mid-July on and it remains an effective way to catch Bluefin. In fact we had phenomenal Bluefin chunk fishing in July of 2006 when on our best days we caught and released 15 or more Bluefin per day caught on jigs, butterfish and, best of all, with live squid when they could be caught off the bottom during the day. Catching live squid in the daytime was introduced to us by Captain Mark DeBlasio who ran the HOOKED UP II out of Cape May in July 2006 before moving the boat up to Pt. Pleasant, NJ for the summer offshore season with Canyon Runner Charters. Squid can be caught during the day by rigging squid jigs in tandem with light fluorocarbon leader (less than 25 pounds) with 25-30 pound braided line on the squid jigging reels. We prefer YO-ZURI Super Cloth Squid Jigs in the colors white/pink, white/blue and white/green for squid jigging. We use whatever weight it takes to drop the squid jigs to the bottom. Using live squid to catch Bluefin in the day time is one of the most effective techniques for chunking inshore Bluefin that we have learned in the last 20 years.

When chunking, it is imperative to use your color fish finder machine(s) to look for bait, mainly sand eels, on the bottom and to set up on a lump that is holding stacks of bait. You should see Bluefin above the bait. The Bluefin may show up anywhere in the water column but their presence is the key for choosing which hill to start to chunk on. If the bait is there, most likely the Bluefin will be too. In addition the bait often moves from hill to hill and the Bluefin follow their food source. Prior to starting to chunk, we often ride around in the dark before sunrise looking for a hill that is holding bait and tuna. Our very best trips were almost always on weekday's right before or at daybreak and with lighter boat traffic. We keep chunking simple with 6 foot Fluorocarbon leaders from 40-80 pound test and use a #64 rubber band anywhere from 20-50 feet above the leader with a circle hook that is small enough to fit in a cut or whole butterfish. We use mostly circle hooks in the 11/0 or 12/0 size when chunking. We put the baits which can be butterfish, ling or squid down 5 cranks off the bottom. The chunk bite usually really slows down after 9:00 am or as soon as the fleet arrives. Nothing shuts down a tuna bite in our opinion like excessive boat traffic which scatters and sounds the fish.

In the past, we thought it was impossible to catch Bluefin trolling when the water warmed up and the fleet converted to chunking. We went along with this belief for many years until this past season. In 2007 we chunked only one time in early July and due to our success with trolling and jigging, we switched to all trolling and jigging for rest of the season. The primary reason for this success has been the use of the wwwwwb technique for trolling baits. This is the second big change we have adopted for inshore Bluefin fishing since the days when we fished out of Lewes, DE and Ocean City, MD. By using hollow core Spectra on our reels, we have the line capacity we need to troll this way. This method certainly has its detractors but it does catch bigger Bluefin. I have become a firm believer in how effective the wwwwwb can be. We run almost every day

in the summer months and I have seen that this method has produced almost all the bigger Bluefin we have caught the past couple years. One big negative about this type of trolling is if you fish around the more popular lumps and hills that are jammed with lots of boat traffic, having lines out up to 400 yards invites cut offs and tangles if you make sharp turns.

In the 2007 season we concentrated our efforts quite a bit north away from the large fleets so on many days we had only 2-10 boats within a few miles of us. This enabled us to troll at least three lines wwwwwb without problems and resulted in some very good Bluefin catches. Although we did not have the bigger Bluefin over 150 pounds except for a few days in late summer when the Elephant Trunk was open to the multi-day scallop fleet, we caught plenty of charter friendly tuna in the 50-90 lb range. By late August we had a hard time finding Bluefin under 47 inches as almost all that we caught were 50 inches and up.

When we fish in tuna tournaments, we run further south and fish the more popular traditional Bluefin locations such as the Hambone, Hot Dog and Sausage lumps in order to target the bigger bluefin in the 140-175 pound range. For the most part we avoided fishing these areas last season because the large fleets of boats makes putting a good catch together extremely tough. If you fish these well known lumps and hills, we suggest you arrive before daybreak and, if possible, fish on weekdays when there are fewer boats.

Reeling in a bluefin in the 90-125 pound range or bigger can be quite a challenge when the fish is on a rig that is 400 yards back but our charters loved it as it provided a challenging fight they really enjoyed. When trolling using the wwwwwb method, we run three lines with one back about 400 yards shotgun and one placed at 275 yards on one rigger and the other 325 yards back on the other rigger. We also run one or two baits on planers in close, however, many times last year we did not even bother to put out the planers as almost all our tuna bites came on the wwwwwb lines.

When targeting bigger Bluefin over 90 pounds, we use large ballyhoo with a large bullet head Ilander. We rig our lures on 130-150 pound Fluorocarbon leaders that are about 6 feet long. At times, if the bite is slow, we run long 20 foot wind-on Fluorocarbon leaders and occasionally even go down to 80 pound leaders. If there are wahoo or early season bluefish in the area, we go up to regular 180 pound mono leaders on our planer baits. We have found this makes no difference right at sunrise but after the sun comes up, we never put out leaders over 130 pounds when trolling for Bluefin. We've learned we don't need to use Fluorocarbon leaders on dark, overcast days or when the boat traffic is very light as we have been able to catch Bluefin on regular mono leaders without any problem. We have experimented with having both Fluorocarbon and regular mono leaders when trolling and have found the mono gets just as many bites under low light conditions. This also holds true when chunking deep lines down around the bottom. One of the advantages of being able to fish so many days during the summer and fall is we can experiment to see how different methods work. We continually strive to improve and to use the most effective methods available especially since the number of Bluefin that can be boated is limited. These days we don't troll over 5.6 knots when targeting Bluefin. The exception to this is when we put out artificial lures such as Marauders or other wahoo lures to target wahoo and then we troll at least 7-8 knots or more. But if we have ballyhoo in the spread, we continue to troll at the slower speeds and most of the time we do have at least one ballyhoo out either naked or with an Ilander when targeting wahoo. To date we have never had a Bluefin eat a ballyhoo rigged with wire for wahoo even though we have gone down as low as # 9 wire.

After we have caught our legal Bluefin limit, we target wahoo and run tooth proof ballyhoo rigs on our planer baits that have just a short trace of wire. It is our opinion that the right trolling speed, when targeting Bluefin, is to go the slowest you can yet keep the ballyhoo swimming properly.

We have heard of an interesting way to troll for Bluefin when they are holding down close to the bottom. A weight of between 24-36 ounces is attached by one or two #64 black rubber bands or wire 30-50 feet above the bait and then slow trolling much like trolling for stripers. We have never tried this technique as our older boat could not go slow enough to fish this way but we plan on giving it a shot this summer. This is about as close as you can get to drift chunking while trolling. When we first started fishing for giant Bluefin down off Morehead City, NC, we trolled upwards to 6.8 knots and caught lots of Bluefin at that speed but there were more tuna then plus the boat traffic was not what it is now. Less pressure is put on the planer lines when trolling slower and with the increased use of planer rods these days slower is the way to go from our viewpoint. This coming season we will have the luxury of using trolling valves that we have on our new HOOKED UP II which we did not have on our old boat. We will be able to go just fast enough for the ballyhoo to swim right and that may even mean trolling with one engine at times. We continually make adjustments when trolling to take into account wave height and direction and wind. I am currently gathering information about the use of planer rods instead of cleating the planer lines like we have done in the past. The advantages of using planer rods are the ability to more easily adjust the distance of the planer and not having planer line laying in the cockpit when the planers are brought in when a fish is hooked up. I know a captain who uses a planer rod and if the bite is slow, he positions one planer as far back as 200 feet behind the boat. This can only be done with planer rods with reels that can hold the amount of line needed to do this. With our planers at 60 and 100 feet we cannot adjust how far we put them out and I do like the idea of being able to change this by using a planer rod and reel.

We use #24 and #32 planers rigged with 200 pound Jerry Brown Spectra although we still have 300 pound mono on some #24 planers. We converted to using hollow core Spectra on our planers a few years ago because the thinner line diameter allows the planer lines to run a little deeper. We haven't had any issues with the Spectra cutting anyone as it is softer than Power Pro. I suggest using Spectra on your planer or downriggers. We also paint our planers black to help prevent Wahoo and shark bites.

We run the #24 and #32 planers at 60 feet and 100 feet with our baits at various distances behind the planers. Most times we run the bait at least 200 feet beyond the planer but of course we switch how far the baits are back depending on the bait sets that are getting the bites. We mark the lines with rigging floss so we can put the baits back out to the exact same distance on subsequent troll sets after bringing the lines in when fighting a fish or after checking or changing baits.

We had one of our best seasons ever in 2007 on inshore Bluefin all trolling and jigging. The advantage we see in trolling is you can get away from the popular lumps that become absolutely crazy at times and you do not have to go down in leader size to get bites once the sun comes up and the large fleet shows up. There have been many occasions in past years when we lost some very nice Bluefin because we had to use very light leaders to get a day time chunk bite and the leaders just did not hold up after a long battle with light drags. We do not have to worry about this when trolling which to me is a real benefit. With the heavier leaders we can put much more

drag pressure on the tuna and get them to the boat quicker. This is important for the Bluefin we release as they have a better chance of survival with a shorter fight. There are also those hot, humid and still days when the flies invade and are just killers and by trolling we get some relief from this.

We rig our ballyhoo by punching out the eyes with a wooden dowel and use rigging wire to keep the mouth closed. We fish our ballyhoo with Ilanders or naked with chin weights. This past year we also had good luck with Carolina Gentleman lures in front of medium ballyhoo that were very effective for 50-80 pound Bluefin. Overall the best color combination for us was the crystal electric-pink/electric-white with blue/white being the second most productive. On some trips it did not matter what color Ilander we put out as we caught Bluefin on many different colors. I am sure Billy Baits, Sea Witches and other lures in front of ballyhoo would all work if the fish are feeding. The secret in my opinion is to get the baits down and make sure they are swimming correctly. You can check that the ballyhoo is swimming correctly by letting the ballyhoo bait line out next to the boat or off the stern and then watching the ballyhoo to make sure it swims and doesn't wobble or spin.

As far as fishing locations go, I already mentioned that last season the really big Bluefin seemed to be located south around 50-60 miles or so from our home port of Cape May mostly along the 20 fathom line and out to the 30, but these areas also had lots of boat traffic with both trollers and chunkers depending on the day and time you fished. We know for a fact there was a very good troll bite extending north up off Atlantic City, NJ for a least a few boats and south down past the Hambone. The message here is there were quite a few good sized Bluefin all along the 20 fathom line and it was just up to the angler to get a good chart and experiment until they found the bait and tuna. We fished anywhere from the Misty Blue to the north and south down 5 miles past the Hambone and many of the lumps and hills had Bluefin on them at one time or another last season.

One brief note about jigging Bluefin tuna. We keep a couple of rods with jigs ready to go so when one of our troll lines hook up, we can immediately drop the jigs down and jig while the angler is fighting the troll line fish. This has been a very effective method for getting double and triple hook ups. We use rigging dental floss to mark the line on our jig rods every 25-50 feet so we can determine the exact depth of our jigs. Although we have seen many Bluefin caught on various types of butterfly jigs, we have found traditional hammered diamond jigs in 7 and 10 ounce sizes work the best for us. On a few trips last year the Bluefin bite with fish up to 80 plus pounds was so awesome on jigs that we never went back on the troll. All our jigging reels are spooled with 80 pound Spectra with a mono top shot put on custom rods made for jigging only.

Here are some mistakes I believe many anglers make when targeting the larger 80 pound plus inshore Bluefin tuna. Nothing is ever written in stone when it comes to fishing but this list may be helpful to those who have had trouble catching summer Bluefin tuna in our area. The first is not to troll in the immediate area of the chunk fleet. The second is put away the artificial lures and spreader bars and go with 100% ballyhoo, either naked or with a lure. The third is slow down your troll as much as you can while still keeping the ballyhoo swimming correctly. The fourth is to use planers or downriggers to get at least one bait deep. The fifth is to get at least two baits wwwwb at least 300 yards or more with Ilander-ballyhoo. I suggest you use a blue/white Ilander-ballyhoo and crystal white and pink in your spread. You don't need to troll

more than 4 or 5 lines. Do your best to avoid the well known popular locations that attract armadas of boats on weekends and holidays. Try to arrive on the tuna grounds as early as possible as bluefin usually bite right at sunrise before the boat traffic arrives.

I strongly believe running planers, running baits wwwwwb and trolling with natural dead baits greatly increases your chances for catching Bluefin over 100 pounds and up to at least 150 pounds. I talked with many boats last year that really struggled mostly because they did not have the correct spread out. It is also very important to use top quality baits and to defrost them in kosher salt or a brine solution.

For those of you who would like to see how we do this first hand, we will be running combination bluefin-wahoo trips for up to 6 anglers on the new 55 foot HOOKED UP II out of Cape May, NJ this summer. We had the only Bluefin over 200 pounds caught last year out of the South Jersey Marina in Cape May and the year before our boat had the largest Bluefin ever weighed in at South Jersey at 224 pounds. We match up singles and small parties plus if you have a private boat, we can arrange for one of our crew to join you on a fishing trip to teach you the finer points on how we fish for Bluefin. The last point is to always have a jig ready to drop over when you see tuna on your color machine or after you hook up while trolling as this works extremely well.

Regards,

Capt John Sowerby

Caveman Sportfishing Charters on the new 55 custom Carolina HOOKED UP II