

JOHN'S DILEMA:

To remain in the cockpit, where the action is, or to make the move to the helm as a full-time skipper. Read on to see where he'd rather be. That's Capt. Mitch McFrederick of the CHAPIN on the left, John is on the right and billing the marlin above.

My
Outer Banks
Education

Written & Photographed
by Capt. John Oughten

The story of a young skipper who moves to North Carolina's Outer Banks to learn big game fishing from the masters. Join him in the ultimate classroom.



Most of my early life was spent in South Miami. The canals that ran through the backyards were filled with largemouth bass, but the real adventure was to be found about two miles away on the flats of Key Biscayne. I vividly recall pulling seine nets with my buddies, catching shrimp and pinfish for bait when I was just 10 years old.

Using Mitchell spinning reels and live bait, we would catch tarpon, bonefish and even permit. We were kids—we didn't really know what we were doing—but it worked. Nowadays, you've got to be a rocket scientist with thousands of dollars of specialized gear to catch those fish, or at least it seems that way.

Some days we would bike up to the salt locks and snag corn-cob mullet, then make the long trek back to the bay. We'd strip them into baits and catch the barracuda that always seemed

to be around. That was probably my introduction to rigging baits, but who knew at the time.

In my teens, I started mating on local charter and day boats, cutting bait and cleaning fish. The most important thing to me was being on the water every day; fishing, chasing lobsters or crewing. While I haven't been back to Florida in years, it was the birthplace of my interest in fishing. My barefoot, "Huck Fin" encounters with the local fish population fueled my desire to fish as a vocation, a desire that continues to grow even today.

THE MOVE NORTH

In the 1980s I found myself in a whole new world, Toms River, New Jersey. I was surprised to find the area a hotbed of saltwater fishing and home to loads of charter and head boats. While the species pursued were different, the intensity of the fishermen was undeniable. I began working on a few six-pack charter

boats like Capt. Bob Egger's SPUNKY and Capt. Keith Burnett's OBSESSION. I worked almost full-time as first mate aboard Capt. Ron Brauen's MISS MICHELLE II & III, 65-foot charter boats sailing out of Manasquan Inlet.

I found out quickly how different fishing was in Jersey and learned by listening and watching those around me. The top target species on the six-pack boats were tuna, mako sharks and the occasional billfish. The head boats usually chased inshore species like bluefish, fluke and sea bass, but during the prime offshore season, even they took parties to the edge for tuna. My favorite trips were the overnights to the canyons. When the fishing was hot, I'd do three to five trips a week. The long runs gave me time to absorb new things.

While trolling plastics seemed pretty simple, when you really got into it there was much to learn and many nuances that increase productivity.



BATTLIN' BLUEFINS: John made his first appearance in Hatteras during the winter bluefin tuna run. He learned a lot about baiting and catching these powerful fish that season. Let him show you how they do it, Carolina style.

Chunking yellowfin tuna with stand-up tackle was always a great time. On the big boats, we'd sometimes get 10 or more anglers hooked up at once with 40- to 90-pound-class tuna while the rest of the school was eating off the stern. The non-stop action was fun and ran us poor mates ragged cutting bait, maintaining the slick, untangling lines, gaffing fish and giving anglers moral support.

While the fishing was usually good, the seasons in Jersey were shorter and I found myself going crazy shore-bound during the winter. Throughout it all, my goal was to earn enough time on the water and gather enough experience and knowledge to get my captain's license, so the off-season was devoted to study.

Soon I had enough time to qualify for a 100-ton masters certificate and all the hands-on experience and countless hours spent studying paid

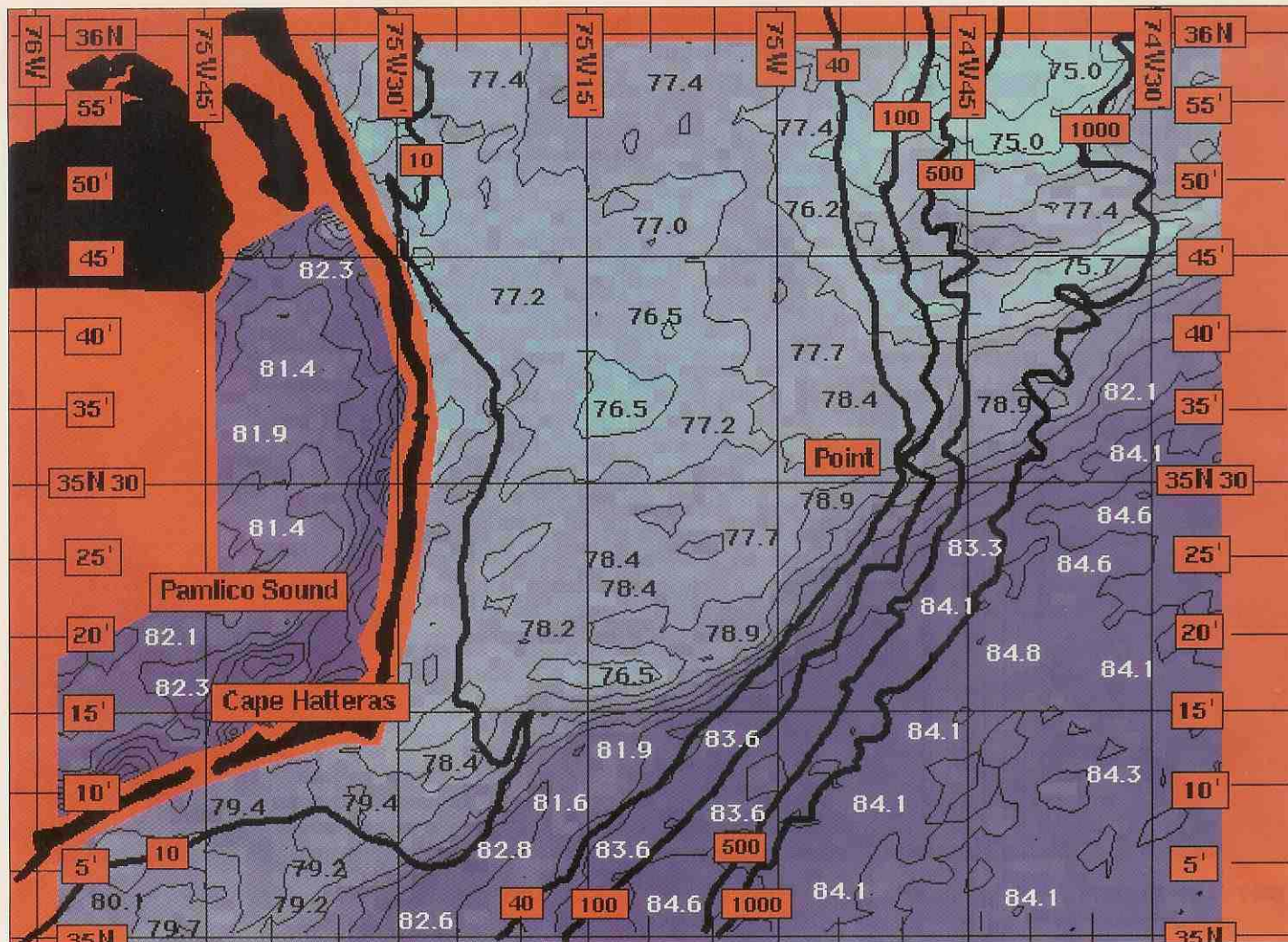
off. I passed the exam first time out. Getting my license turned out to be one big disappointment. Running the boat just wasn't as much fun as working the cockpit. So I decided for the time being, I'd stay put "down below!"

CAROLINA DREAMIN'

While working the Jersey boats I heard talk of the incredible winter run of giant bluefin tuna off the Outer Banks. Rumors turned to truths and intensified my excitement. I began putting out feelers to see if I could get myself in the thick of things. Friends put me in touch with Capt. Bill Verbanis, owner of the REELISTIC, who berths his boat in the Outer Banks during the winter run. Bill needed a co-captain/mate and before I knew it, I was on my way with absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into.

No sooner had I arrived in North Carolina then panic set in. With all the different kinds of fishing and local techniques, I found that I was in for another serious learning experience if I wanted to make the grade. Picking the local's brains wasn't easy, especially for an "outsider" like me, but it didn't take too long to make some friends and gain some trust. After all, fishing has its own language and when one seriously afflicted person meets another, a common bond develops.

After a while, I started working the cockpit for Capt. Mitch McFrederick, a great guy and super captain, on his beautiful 46-foot Whiticar, the CHAPIN. He had fished from Hatteras Harbor the past six years, moving to Oregon Inlet for the white marlin run in the Fall. My education was about to start in the home waters of some of the finest skippers that fish the Atlantic. The following are some of the lessons,



DREAMIN' OF THE STREAM: The Gulf Stream is a constant companion, rarely more than a short run from the slips at Hatteras Harbor Marina. This satellite sea surface temperature chart (courtesy Offshore Satellite Services, Inc.) shows just how close it can be. The darker the blue, the warmer the water. Further to the north, off Oregon Inlet, N.C., offshoots and bulges from the Stream host awesome fishing for white and blue marlin during the Summer and Fall months.

tips and techniques I've learned since my arrival.

Just remember I am not the expert here, they are. I'm just the hard-working kid from Florida and Jersey with the desire to learn from and fish with the best. Desire to me, is "the want of knowledge and the willingness to work to achieve it." The knowledge and experience I gained before arriving set the stage for learning the ways of the Outer Banks. I have since gained a deep respect for these fishermen. I thank them for offering me insight to their unselfish attitudes, love of the sea and techniques.

GULF STREAM ON MY DOORSTEP

The waters off the Outer Banks are totally unique. Longtime captain, Jerry Shepard of the famed TUNA

DUCK, talked to me about fishing the Gulf Stream out of Cape Hatteras. He brings it all into perspective when he says, "there's no resident fish here, they're all just passin' through!" The fish off the Cape are in the process of migrating to someplace else, or wintering for a short period time. The area north of Oregon Inlet is different. Tuna, marlin and other pelagics will take up temporary residence along the shelf since the area is north of the actual flow of the Gulf Stream. Captain Jerry feels that most pelagics off Oregon Inlet will be caught between 50 and 500 fathoms; however, the drop-offs here are different than those associated with the canyons of the northeast. The Point is the only semblance of a Canyon in the whole area.

Captain Rom Whitaker, skipper of the charter boat RELEASE, an early contributor to THE JOURNAL, told me the Gulf Stream here varies in temperature through the seasons from the low 70s to the mid 80s. The current speed ranges anywhere from 1-5 knots, and both him and Jerry mentioned small spurs and fingers that spin off or extend inshore from the Stream's north side.

The Stream affects fishing locations on a daily basis. For example, you might run south from Hatteras Inlet to intercept a school of Gulf Stream northbound yellowfin tuna one day, and have to run 20 or more miles to the north the next day in order to intercept the same school. Rom feels the key to success is your ability to read the water. Riplines, color and tempera-

ture changes and current edges all help you locate bait concentrations. Color is of particular importance.

SMOKER captain Brynner Parks, taught me about a situation he called "covered up." This is when the blue water of the Gulf Stream moves in and slides over the green, cooler inshore water. It's important to recognize this phenomenon because the initial color change at the surface can be mistaken for a tight break when the real break is actually further into the blue water, sometimes over a mile away. Under this condition, you'll find the fish well off the initial color change. You can identify it by peaking your color scope to mark the thermocline when you cross a color break. If the thermocline is near the surface, the green water is "covered up," but when you enter the actual demarcation between the blue Gulf Stream and green slope water, the thermocline drops away.

Captain Brynner taught me that off Oregon Inlet, where fish can take up residence, you're often fishing fingers and small spurs that push inshore from the edge of the Stream. They bring in clean, blue, warm water and amass bait. Unlike Hatteras, where the fish come and go, the fish that gather on these breaks will often hold there for days on end because there is no strong current flow associated with the Gulf Stream proper.

One of the top marlin fishermen in the area, Capt. Arch Bracher of the PELICAN, told me that in his opinion, "the North Carolina coast is probably one of the best bluewater fishing areas in the world." The close proximity of the Gulf Stream, the way it turns offshore at Cape Hatteras, the interplay of structure and breaks to the north is unlike anyplace else along this continent. Capt. Arch has fished many areas over several decades and if he says this is it, then who am I to argue! Since arriving here, I've found the fishing to be nothing short of incredible.

BLUEFIN BONANZA

One of my first days on the "island," I was walking the docks when I ran into an old friend, Capt. Joe Crawford. He was working the cockpit along with Rich Samuels on the

COUNTER ATTACK, run by Capt. Benny "Skeets" Warren. They were targeting the awesome giant bluefin tuna during the great Hatteras run. Their angler that day was Jim Blair from Florida who asked if I'd come along and shoot some video of his adventure. On the fishing grounds, I watch Jim and his friends tag and release 52 in the 200-pound-plus class. What an introduction to Outer Banks bluefin tuna fishing.

Winter bluefin fishing here is relatively simple, but like many species the techniques used are different and quite effective. The average trip aboard the CHAPIN starts around 6 a.m. We load up ice and fresh fatbacks (menhaden) and on the way out I play teacher. I run the anglers through the proper use of the tackle and handling the fish. Since this is tag and release fishing, we use International 130 two-speeds on custom bent-butt rods

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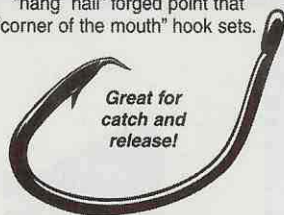
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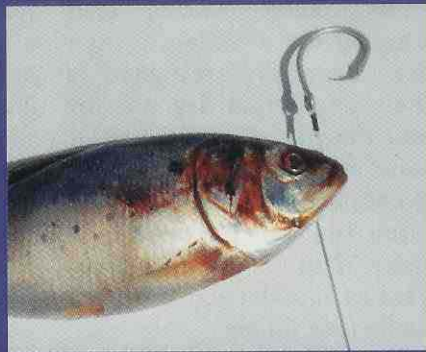
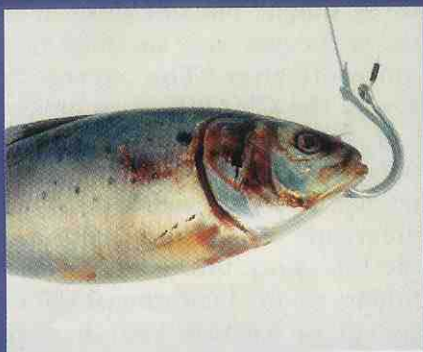
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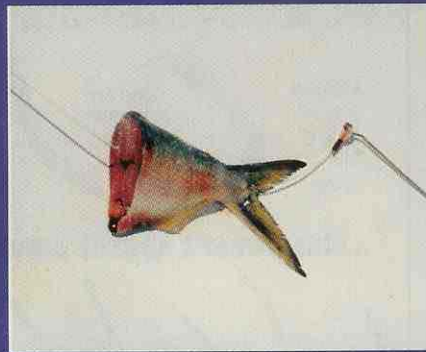
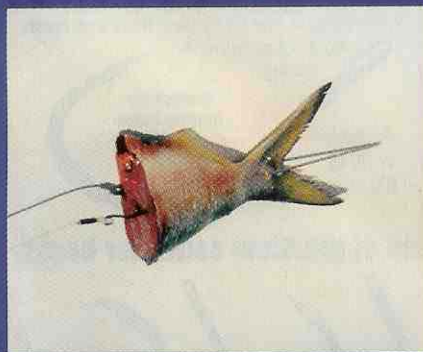
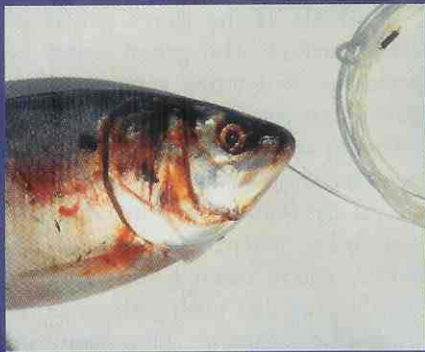
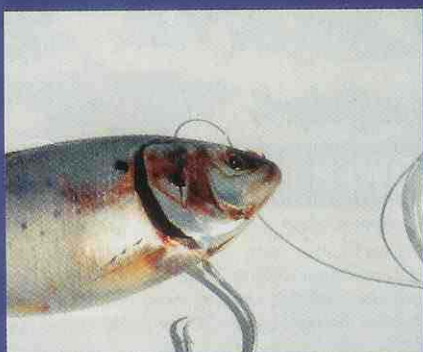
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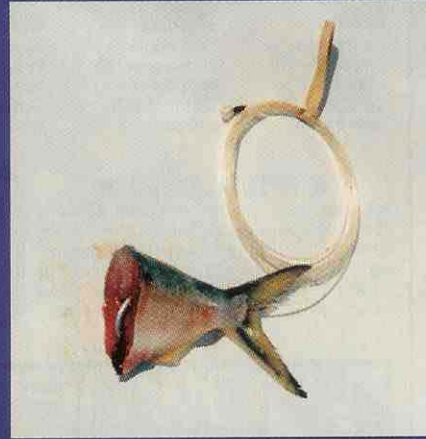
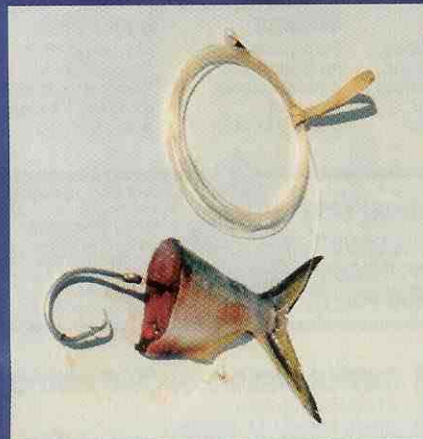
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RIGGING BAITS FOR BLUEFIN: When chunking, whole menhaden are rigged by running a circle hook up through its nose, back in through the eye socket and out the gill, then it's stuffed back under the gill plate so that the hook is completely hidden.



GIVE 'EM SOME TAIL: When the bluefins are acting finicky, just a menhaden tail is rigged by running fluorocarbon leader material from the fin and out the cut section using a rigging needle. Then a circle hook is crimped onto the leader and pulled back inside the bait where it is completely hidden. Rigged in this manner, the bait looks natural drifting back into the slick and the fluorocarbon leader is near invisible.



spooled with 200-pound dacron, loop-to-looped to a 100-yard top-shot of 300-pound mono.

A sturdy, "unlimited-class" fighting chair with a bucket harness secured to the pedestal is a must when drag settings start at 55 pounds and go up from there. I put each person in the chair, show them how to adjust the harness, pull on the rod teaching them to use their weight and legs to fight the fish and not their backs. Teamwork is critical with these big fish and each member of the charter must understand what is expected; one in the chair, another behind to steer it, another maintaining the slick while I'm wiring a fish and someone ready with the tag stick.

Frequently, the bluefin are rarin' to go and hit the fatbacks with abandon, unlike anything I experienced off the New Jersey coast. When the tuna are in a feeding frenzy, we use 25-foot leaders of 300- to 400-pound test mono. We maintain a full selection of leader weights down to 150 pounds for when the fish get finicky and also have 130- and 180-pound fluorocarbon leaders at the ready, if needed.

Five-gallon buckets of cut up fatbacks are used for chunking. I prepare several dozen whole baits and another dozen tails-only, all rigged on 14/0 or 16/0 Mustad circle hooks. Upon arrival at a specific wreck, we wait our turn. Capt. Mitch will then position the boat, often not an easy job due to wind and current direction, so it will drift over the wreck. When he marks fish, the chunking starts. With an angler in the chair, I pull the line off the reel by hand, dropping the hook-bait back with the chunks. When a fish bites, I drop the line, yell strike, the angler pushes the lever up and Mitch puts the boat in gear and runs ahead to get the fish away from the wreck. When the fish are concentrated and feeding, it's just that simple. With this arrangement, fish weighing 300-500 pounds can be whipped in under 30 minutes, a necessity if you're going to tag and release them in good condition.

At times, when the bluefin are "hanging" on the wrecks, we'll use live bluefish for bait. The circle hook is inserted in his back, forward of the dorsal fin and over the side it goes. On it's journey to the bottom, it will usually be inhaled by a big bluefin. The hook-up procedure is the same.

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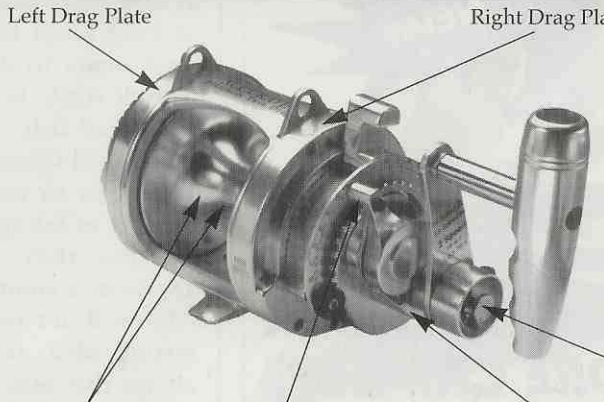
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When they're not stacked up on a wreck, we troll one to three lines along temperature breaks or in open water near the wrecks. The shotgun position gets a naked horse ballyhoo run from the bridge or centerrigger, and the two flatlines are armed with ballyhoo, either naked or dressed with a blue and white skirt. It's incredible to see a big bluefin nail a trolled bait, the splash is unbelievable. Once we hook-up on the troll, chunking begins in earnest and we can usually hook-up another one or two tuna before having to go back to trolling.

Like my first day fishing Hatteras bluefins, there are those days when all hell breaks loose—it is the most amazing thing I've ever seen. We'll get over huge schools of feeding bluefin tuna for hours on end while we hook-up 200- to 350-pounders on every drop. It is a sight you'll never forget!

DOLPHIN DELIRIUM

In early April, dolphin make their appearance on the Outer Banks. On

the CHAPIN, we use "bailing" gear when the fish are thick. Bailing gear consists of a half-dozen Penn GLS25s reels on light-action, custom 6-foot rods, loaded with 25-pound test Stren monofilament. These outfits are used when chunking bait holding a school alongside the boat.

The first thing Capt. Mitch does is instruct everyone on board to keep a sharp look-out for weedlines or any floating objects. The rigs are simple, 4/0 long shank hooks on leader material from 30- to 50-pound test, usually with a 1/2-ounce egg sinker above the swivel. Baits can be squid strips, chunks of ballyhoo, tuna belly or albacore (little tunny). I maintain several one gallon bags of cut bait at the ready because this fishing can be fast and furious, hence the "bailing gear."

When something is spotted floating on the surface, Capt. Mitch slowly approaches the object and we start tossing chunks with two lines in the water. If dolphin come out from under and start eating, Mitch works the boat in a very slow circle around the flotsam

while I work the anglers in a clockwise direction around the cockpit. Dropping a bait, hooking up and working their fish across the transom making room for the next angler to drop a bait all while keeping a hooked fish in the water at all times. This allows us to catch a number of fish quickly because they don't always stick around.

Now don't get the wrong idea, it's not always that easy. Dolphin can be very finicky for any number of reasons. A billfish nearby really puts them on edge; sometimes the water is very clear and they get leader shy; sometimes they get picky about what they'll eat. One thing I learned for sure is that fresh false

albacore chunks will overcome the pickiness, they love the stuff and dropping to 10- or 20-pound test leaders helps when they are line shy.

Rich Samuel, mate on the charter boat SUSPENSE, provided these thoughts on fishing a big "float" with lots of life and dolphin. "Preparation is key. The chunks and baits must be ready in advance. If they won't eat chunks, keep the spoons ready to troll, which might also catch wahoo that are sometimes found under the dolphin. When the dolphin are big, be prepared to troll ballyhoo with Sea Witch skirts. The big guys fall for them regularly."

Captain Mitch taught me how he fishes big dolphin on board the CHAPIN along the extensive weedlines that develop after a southeast blow. We pull ballyhoo on 50s and 80s, heavy equipment for these fish, but we never know when a blue marlin is going to take a bait intended for dolphin. They often hover around the schools—one of their favorite forage fish. If a dolphin hits a rigged bait but doesn't get hooked, he drops it back, they usually jump right back on it. Feed them just like a billfish, be patient and let them eat. Then go to strike, drag and set the hook.

YELLOW GOLD

Tuna are the bread and butter fish of the Outer Banks throughout much of the year. Yellowfin are the most abundant, running from schoolies of 10-pounds to bruisers over 100. We also encounter bigeye and some blackfin in March and April. Captains Rom and Jerry taught me that here, tuna are far more temperature than depth oriented and most comfortable in 75 degree water or slightly cooler. If these comfortable water temperatures can be found over the steep drop-offs located around the Hatteras offshore area, all the better. When fishing the Gulf Stream with its tremendous current flow, dolphin can move rapidly from one day to the next—there seems to be an endless parade of schools marching northbound through the area.

Off Oregon Inlet, the dolphin tend to be more stable, like the water found there. Capt. Brynner Parks told me,



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