

# NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

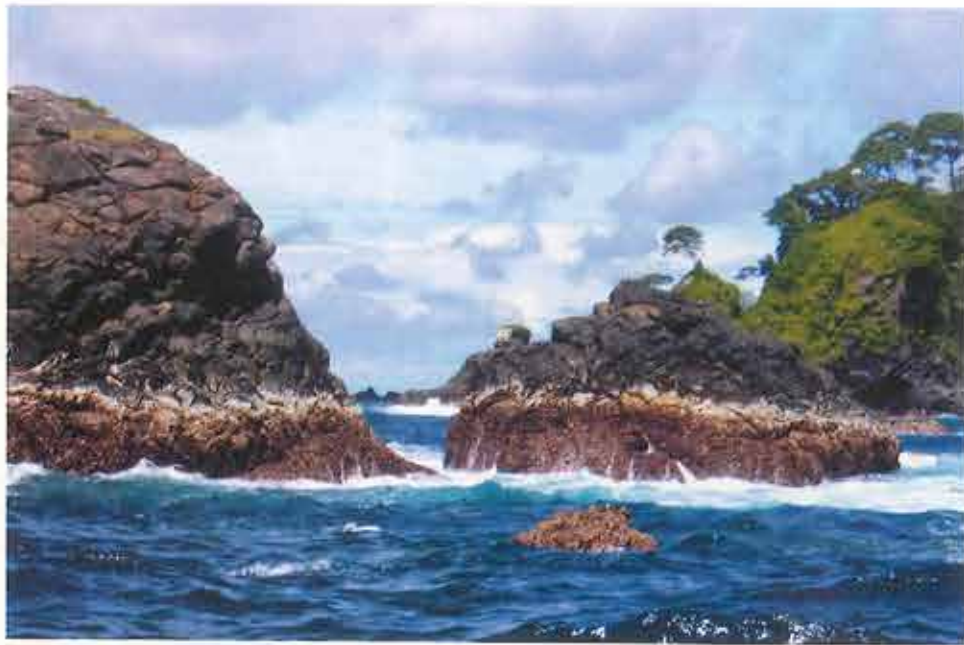
Text and Photos by Riley Love

Top captains from the new Panama Big Game Fishing Club discuss winning approaches for monster game fish.

**W**hen our plans for peacock bass fishing in Venezuela in early 2003 were terminated by the political strife there, I was delighted to stumble across an Internet website for a new fishing camp on the Pacific coast of Panama. My brother, Mike, and I had fished this area several times before, going back 25 years when we visited Club Pacifico on the island of Coiba, a lodge that has gone on to be the stuff of legends.

Over the years, we fished both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Panama as well as many of the great spots from Mexico to Ecuador. We had fished both land-based and floating operations and consider the area around this new lodge, the Panama Big Game Fishing Club, to be some of the best water we had ever fished. What we didn't know (at least not at the time), it was also home to some of the most savvy captains we'd ever fished with. Join us, Capt. Bill Beck and Capt. Lee Campbell, the "new kids in town," outline the procedures they use to live-bait monster cubera, sailfish, marlin, and more.





Blue trevally linger near the rocky outcroppings in Panama and will readily crash a well-placed surface lure.

### MEETING THE NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

The Panama Big Game Fishing Club is located on the Isla Boca Brava which guards the mouth of the Bahia de Muertos, near the city of David. This is the second largest city in Panama, and is less than 50 miles from its border with Costa Rica.

The Club is the product of the efforts of captains Bill Beck and Lee Campbell, both from the Miami, Fla., area. Beck is the son of a charter boat captain and has more than 30 years experience with fishing charters around Miami. When I talked to him on the phone about setting up a trip, he was very accommodating. The camp is brand new, and we would be some of the first Americans to use it.

The organizing of dates and air flights went very smoothly, and we were able to get a package just as we wanted. Lynn Narramore, an experienced angler and friend from Waller, Texas, would also be coming for his first trip to the area.

We were met at the airport by a travel agent arranged by the lodge and then taken to the VIP lounge for a cool beverage and a comfortable seat while their representative took our bags through customs. We overnighted in Panama City at the beautiful Caesar Park Hotel. The next morning, the same agent took us to the downtown airport for a one-hour domestic airline flight to David. A lodge representative met us at the airport where we were transferred to a waiting water taxi.

Next came a comfortable one-hour ride through the bay. Water ran like a river,

but no river was there, only the strong tides characteristic of the region. Tall trees gradually gave way to low-lying mangroves, and the boat brought us to the Panama Big Game signs on both sides of the channel mouth. The first of these was their fuel depot and the other was on the boat dock of the club.

### ARRIVE READY TO FISH

As we arrived, Capt. Campbell was standing on the dock aboard a 31-foot Albemarle with engines running. "Gentleman, if you would like to step on the boat to begin fishing, it's ready to go. The cooler is stocked with lunch and cold beverages, and there are baits in the livewell. I'll see that your bags get to your cabin." We immediately jumped aboard to get a start on our Panama

fishing adventure.

Our Captain, ChiChi Gonzales, the son of a commercial fisherman, and himself a 30 year charterboat veteran had been fishing through the years for many of the sportfishing operations on the west coast of Panama. Capt. Gonzales is a powerfully built man with an exuberant personality, winning smile, and a real passion for fishing.

The fishing topography of the region is dominated by undersea mountains which rise from the depths as much as several thousand feet to form small islands or undersea banks often less than 50 feet from the surface. These islands and pinnacles stand in the way of currents which force oxygen and nutrient-rich waters upwards to the surface attracting the bait that brings in the regions migratory fish species like a magnet. Also, the Humboldt current flows to within 150 miles of shore and tectonic movement has shaped a rugged coastline with numerous volcanos in the region.

On the way offshore, we observed the numerous rocky crags jutting from the



water, which proved to be small escarpments demonstrating the stratified lines of the earth's crust. These rocks would provide the targets for the first half day dedicated to inshore fishing. The main species targeted in these areas include roosterfish, amberjack, and several species of snapper, particularly the mighty cubera. We fished with both lures and live baits, which yielded a variety of fish, including jacks in the 20- to 40-pound range and a 35-pound cubera snapper, which we took back to camp at days end for a spectacular dinner.

### KEYING IN ON THE LADRONES & MONTUOSA ISLANDS

The lodge itself is situated within striking distance of several offshore targets. Our first full day would start with the Ladrones Islands, including several nearby undersea banks. Eight miles beyond the Ladrones is the Deep Drop, where the edge of the tectonic shelf drops off 3,000 feet into the depths of the Pacific Ocean.

Another destination is Montuosa Island. Here submerged structure includes an underwater volcano, and gas bubbles from the old vent can sometimes be witnessed on the surface. Further on is Hannibal Bank, long the most prominent destination of the region. It was on this underwater mountain where my brother and I had taken our first black marlin 25 years ago.

When I had talked to Beck on the phone weeks earlier I had asked him how far the lodge was from Hannibal Bank. His response surprised me: "I don't know why people keep asking me about Hannibal Bank when other areas are as good to fish if not better."

The target offshore species this time of year would be yellowfin tuna and marlin. Black marlin have the longest season and are the predominant species with some blue marlin scattered throughout the area, though marlin, both blue and black can be found here year round. Two weeks earlier, an abundance of sailfish moved into these waters and many were fought and released. At other times of the year, large numbers of dorado abound, and I have caught more wahoo here in their season than any place I've ever been.

Campbell was quick to offer his thoughts on location and technique for marlin: "The Deep Drop runs down the west side of the Ladrones, then close in by Isla Montuosa then continuing close to the Hannibal Bank region. This drop off can produce great action dragging a spread of plastics anytime throughout the year.

"Last year, December was the best month fishing along the dropoff with a lot of blues pushing through the region. There is also a nice platform near the Ladrones that holds lots of sailfish. We only use live bait for marlin around the many undersea mounds in the area, taking care not to drag over them, but instead troll varying-size circles around them.

"Marlin will hold in these areas anytime the water is clean with a good current and temperature less than 84 degrees. They tend to work the schools of bonito from December through May. Our ratio for the region is about three blacks to one blue marlin with very few stripes fought."

### MAKING BAIT PANAMA STYLE

When Capt. Campbell catches bonito for bait, he works close to the sea mounds running two bait rigs, two diving lures, and a bird down the middle with a feather behind it. For the bait rigs, he uses small 4-inch squid skirts with a 3/8-ounce sinker and a 5/0 2X strong hook. Campbell uses four skirts to a rig on 80-pound test fluorocarbon leader.

"My favorite diving lures are 6-5/8- and 8-7/8-inch Yo-Zuri Bonita plugs in a pearl-blue-and-purple color. I also like large sinking Magnum Rapalas in red-and-white, black-and-purple, and green mackerel (large snapper like these babies). For the bird-and-feather combo, I use an orange bird that floats so it can be left out when you have fish on. I prefer a 6-inch Zuker's feather with a very good quality short-shank hook on a small amount of cable with about 10 feet of 80-pound test fluorocarbon leader. The Zuker feathers hold up well and catches a lot of different kinds of baitfish. My favorite colors are green-yellow-and-pink, red-and-white, and purple-and-black. When we work this combination for bonito we usually troll about 5 to 6 knots. We also jig up small jacks for bait near the rocks and right off the dock."

To keep the bait alive and healthy, Campbell makes his own tuna tubes out of 6-inch PVC pipe and sets up four on each boat in addition to the livewells. Once caught, the bonito are immediately placed in these tubes. I found this to be the "modus operandi" on all the boats I saw in the area. Besides billfish, the local captains also catch some nice yellowfin tuna, dolphin, wahoo amberjack, and big cubera snapper using these large live baits.



An ideal setup for live-baiting in Panama is an 18/0 Eagle Claw circle hook tied with this local knot which allows the hook to swing freely on the monofilament, thus making a more natural presentation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**RILEY LOVE** is a physician now residing in Kentucky. In early childhood he discovered fishing in the ponds, lakes, and streams of the Midwest then began a life-long love affair with the sea from the first time he saw it. He lived much of his adult life in San Francisco, Cal., and has a home in the Florida Keys where he fishes regularly and also scuba dives. Over the last 40 years, the trio of Dr. Love, his father, and his brother have fished not only the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of Panama, but most of Central and South America. They maintain a three generation family tradition of international travel for the purpose of sport fishing with an emphasis on new and less-traveled fishing destinations. He has written numerous professional articles and several short stories and is a member of the International Game Fish Association.

## BONITO & JACK FOR MONSTER PELAGICS

When Campbell fishes live bonito, he ties a short Bimini Twist with a direct loop connection to a 20-foot, 200-pound test wind-on leader tied to a heavy Aussie swivel with a 15-foot, 300-pound test fluorocarbon leader. He uses an 18/0 Eagle Claw heavy, wire circle hook tied on with a knot the local captains taught him that is very small and creates a loop in which the hook can swing freely. He also files down the neck of the hook right behind the barb. His top captain, Chi-Chi Gonzales, swears this helps to get better and more secure hook-ups.

He'll run two bonito off the flat lines; sometimes one with a break-away sinker. Sometimes he'll set out three bonito with one on the rigger, but usually he trolls

two on the flat lines and one jack on each outrigger. He bridles baits as close as possible to the head so the hooks cannot turn inward and stick the baitfish. Also, Campbell will have a pitch rod in the cockpit ready to send back a jack to an aggressive fish.

He trolls as slowly as possible, staying off the tops of pinnacles and mounds, keeping one engine in neutral and switching engines every 20 minutes or so.

"When we are dragging plastic lures, I like to troll 8 to 10 knots running a slightly zig-zag course," Campbell said. "When we run a full wahoo spread our speed will be around 12 knots. We go out with a lot of different tackle in order take advantage of the many different species we run across. The one thing I can

## LIVING LARGE IN PANAMA

The Panama Big Game Fishing Club lodge sits on the highest promontory of the local hillside. It's accessed by a long flight of stairs from the dock and consists of a bar/central dining area with four cabins and utility buildings. There is a tower atop the main lodge building, which is accessible and provides a beautiful view.



The cabins are not only comfortable but also large and attractive. Teak wood has been used throughout with colorful cushions and bedding providing accents while local tiles, curved surfaces and spacious baths as well as glass bricks for the shower conjure images from *Metropolitan Home* more than a fishing lodge.

The central building is dominated by a large, curved teak bar and hand painted marlin logo on the wall. A mounted local record broadbill swordfish hangs from the ceiling. The bar is well stocked with upscale brands of libations which are all part of the package.

Beck is also a restaurateur in Miami, while Campbell has more than 30 years experience as a chef. These influences are immediately obvious, as half the bar becomes covered with hors d'oeuvres just before dinner. These are both hot and cold utilizing fresh fish, shrimp, and lobster. You really shouldn't miss his seared tuna.

"Everything is produced locally, from the electricity to the cheese," Campbell explained. The main courses for the meals, if you can leave room for them, are multi-course with an international flair. Campbell bakes daily, including Italian dinner rolls and specialty breads for breakfast.



Tuna tubes such as these are critical to the success of local captains, where few baits outperform live, rigged tuna.

guarantee about bluewater fishing is that tomorrow will be different than today."

## CATCHING THE BEST BITE

During our trip, there were two boats at the lodge, a 31-foot Albemarle and a 33-foot Bertram. Since then they have added a 29-foot Phoenix and are shopping for others.

Wake up call is usually 5 a.m. and after a great breakfast, the boats leave the dock at 6. On the first morning of offshore fishing, Capt. Gonzales had already been fishing for live bait an hour earlier and had

our bait tubes full and ready to make the run offshore.

Everything at the lodge ran like clockwork, and the equipment was in excellent condition, including brand new 80-pound Shimano reels. Although our feat of catching 30 odd bonito and small yellowfin in a short time would be considered "fishing" in some areas, here it's only catching bait. I believe that this area of Panama has some of the best fishing available in our hemisphere.

Migratory fish come and go, but the combination of current, depth change, and

underwater structure in this area makes great fishing the norm. Since my trip, Campbell reported catching a lot of marlin up to 800 pounds as well as solid catches of yellowfin tuna up to 300 pounds.

While this region has historically provided excellent fishing, it also has a grim past of both land- and water-based fishing operations that have failed to stand the test of time. Captains Beck and Campbell have launched a serious endeavor with the Panama Big Game Fishing Club, though I'm confident they will prevail against the "elements" and run a high-quality operation for years to come. 🐟

(For more information e-mail the Panama Big Game Club at [panamabiggame@aol.com](mailto:panamabiggame@aol.com). In the United States, call Capt. Bill Beck toll free at 866-281-1225 or send a fax to 305-653-2321.)

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