

GORILLA YELLOWFIN

ON TOP WATER PLUGS

BY RILEY LOVE, M.D.



When you are lives behind your eyes, depending upon vision far above your other senses, a creature of the light. The biochemical wheels and cogs of our brains want images to process prior to making decisions. This is what we want—it's what makes us what we are.

It is no wonder then that such vivid memories are retained from those moments when we stalk fish by sight. Input from our visual cortex triggers the neurotransmitter dopamine to release forward to its receptor sites in the mid-brain. The subsequent roar of activity in our excitation and pleasure centers "turn our cranks." If you could smoke the stuff it would be illegal.

These are luminous moments, recalled along some stream bank or the edges of wild mangroves when we visually track a swimming quarry just there below the surface. More brilliant still are exquisite seconds when the fish would rise, abandoning all caution in its lust for the lure we present, its own neurochemistry tweaked skyward into the red zone. Enticed, it is drawn up to breach the limit of his world and cross the threshold into ours. For in those rare moments he also draws us by our eyes and our minds into his. We are lured to these heart-pounding instants as lustily as any fish.

How can the peak of this experience be obtained and who wouldn't want it? The answer lies in deep blue water where the grandest fishes swim, the ones men call big game.

It's a short list. So succinct in fact, that it makes the cart of Nobel Prize candidates migrating to Stockholm look like a telephone book. The agenda of species that fishermen term "Big Game" of the first order is limited to swordfish, sailfish, the marlins, some species of sharks and tuna.

Of the eight or more members of the tuna family, the yellowfin is ranked second in size and desirability behind only the bluefin. They are found around the globe in waters ranging from 60° to 80° Fahrenheit and from 45° N and 40° S latitudes. The schools of the various oceans intermingle and are not separate

genetically. They are extreme in speed, power and design, noble in every way.

During March, April and May, the tranquil Pacific waters of Panama explode with supreme numbers of big "Gorilla" yellowfin. With trophy prospects over 300 pounds abundant, the gray light of dawn vibrates with the throb of diesel engines as the dock of the Panama Big Game Fishing Club fades into the mist behind us.

The eastward flow of the Northern Equatorial Countercurrent brings the sea's great pelagics from the distant ocean up to the dramatic underwater structure of the Panamanian coast. These predators follow the schools of sardines and bonito. While our captain's electronics fix us over submarine mountains, we watch the surface for the signs of feeding tuna.

Frenzied schools of baitfish erupt from below. From the apex of flight, flocks of gannets tuck their wings to thrust like javelins down beneath the waves. Appaloosa rockets, feeding pantropical spotted dolphins create an acrobatic carnival around our boats. The spectacle of this life and death brawl would be enough for most men. But the eye of the fisherman is different from all others, and these birds and beasts are simply messengers from above and below, bit actors on a larger stage.

It's uncommon to see tuna in the open ocean. Satellite tagging data indicate yellowfin remain at a depth of 180 to 330 feet for 80 percent of the day, spending only 6 percent of the time within 90 feet of the surface. While sight fishing is drop-dead exciting in general, to watch big tuna hurl themselves into the air after their prey is beyond electrifying to a fisherman's central nervous system.

Islands of insane activity, sometimes lasting only minutes, spontaneously burst onto the scene of the otherwise limpid ocean as the tuna bust up the schools of bait. Then they go back down. Sometimes we troll through productive territory and sometimes it's throttles forward to the next available three-act play of diving birds and thrashing baitfish. So now, how to catch them?

GORILLA GEAR

All the boats that fish these waters are equipped with "tuna tubes." These hand crafted PVC devices offer the opportunity to keep bonito and small tuna alive for slow trolling over structure while targeting marlin and big tuna. Pumps and pipes are installed beneath the transoms, well out of the way. Workmanship is high-grade. The live baits are typically bridled through the eye sockets and always attached to a circle hook.

When faster trolling over larger territories, combinations of lures and prepared ballyhoo come into play, with similar spreads as commonly practiced and speeds around seven- to eight-knots. This was productive for multiple fish species including big tuna but wasn't fast enough for spotting up the rapidly developing infernos of hyperkinetic yellowfin feeding. Additionally, there was the jaw dropping frustration of lugging right through a hot spot only to watch huge tuna go airborne right behind our trolled offerings.

Captain Lee Campbell, who manages the Panama Big Game Fishing Club, has fished with top water popping lures all of his life. It is part of the daily fun down in Panama to cast these plugs around rocky islands inshore to take big roosterfish and cuberra snapper. It was natural for him to go to his arsenal when nothing else was working. His strategy involves getting in front of a moving school and letting the tuna come to him. He stays on the outside of the pack so the tuna don't get spooked.

The experience of a tussle with a 200- to 300-pound tuna is similar to dropping your line down off a highway overpass and hooking into a BMW passing beneath. Generally, 50-pound tackle seems reasonable. Lightweight tackle is asking for an exercise in futility. So the immediate reaction to grabbing up a few ounces of graphite spinning gear is a lot like swallowing an oyster for the first time—it just doesn't seem like a good idea. Getting past that moment, one great experience can begin.

TUNA AND DOLPHIN

Although schools of yellowfin tuna are frequently encountered in the open ocean on their own, they are often found in relationship with large schools of several species of dolphin. This seems to be an advantage for the tuna in that the two species compete for the same food, fish and squid, but the dolphins have superior powers of location. Otherwise, they have a couple of factors in common which make them compatible running mates. Like the mammals, tuna are "warm-blooded," albeit in a less sophisticated manner. They are able to trap much of the heat they generate by exertion and can maintain their body temperatures up to 35° Fahrenheit above the ambient environment around them. Furthermore, their torpedo shapes give them identical hydrodynamics to the dolphin so that energy requirements for movement are the same.

For the fisherman, this can be an agreeable arrangement for locating big tuna. A study from 1991 by the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission demonstrated that tuna caught under schools of dolphin are much larger than those otherwise obtained.

Captain Campbell made some changes in the poppers to pad the odds in the topside adversary's favor. He uses big GT Poppers for which he switches off the back hook and substitutes an 11-0 ring and 5-0, or 4-0 4X Strong treble hook for maximal strength. He also prefers the Yo-Zuri Hydro Tiger, adding a 10-0 ring and 3-0 treble hooks.

Super braid 65-pound test line is added to the spinning reels. A 3-foot length of double line is bound to a 100-pound mono leader, adequate in length for casting, using the "knot with no name." Then the drag system is ratcheted down to the maximum that



One of many 100-pound plus tuna taken off the coast of Panama using top water plugs.

the equipment will endure.

"If we catch a small yellowfin on a plug, we'll bridle him and drop him down while we continue to cast. This gives us a shot at a marlin, which will frequently cruise underneath the feeding tuna," says Captain Campbell.

Lads, if it's sport you want, this will give it to you, and anyone with a heart-beat. This technique gives the yellowfin something else that they want to go at when they are up and feeding on top water. Additionally, it fits the situation at hand for the immediate presentation of desirable bait in a vision driven run-and-gun game of momentary opportunities.

Popping the baits yard by yard, waiting, watching for the explosion, and the biggest yellowfin you ever saw. A shot of dopamine anybody? Yeah man, pour me a double. 🍸



Guy Harvey
Marine Wildlife Artist



photo by Bill Watts

\$500,000 For Gulf Fisheries Restoration

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