



YELLOW GRIN

If you fancy some fresh sashimi, here are some handy tips for targeting yellowfin tuna.
WORDS + PICS BY JOHN ASHLEY

THE BITE on the short corner from a huge yellowfin tuna scared the daylights out of us. It's not often these big tuna crash the lures running close to the transom of the boat and a ball of white water showered more than two metres high. From the middle of the spray I managed to snap a shot of the tuna's glistening gold fins a split second before the Shimano 80 let out a deafening scream. The acceleration of these tuna is hard to believe and by the time angler Anthony Pisano got hold of the outfit, half the line on the big reel was gone! The adrenalin surge from the ruckus had Pisano's hands trembling as he tried to clip his harness to the reel in anticipation of a long stand-up battle. Judging by the size of the tuna, there was going to be some sweat and toil before we'd see it again.

Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures' Anthony Pisano fought hard to land this whopper of a yellowfin.

By the time the hues from long golden sickles appeared under the boat, Pisano was near exhausted, his knees buckling as he tried to gain the last few metres of line. The sight of the giant tuna circling under the boat spurred him on, while the rest of us on board gasped at its size. After 45 minutes, the 90kg beast finally popped to the surface.

International star

Sportfishing anglers wishing to test their skills and go for gold should look no further

than big yellowfin tuna. The power and stamina of these fish is second to none and if they grew to the massive size of the Atlantic and Pacific bluefin tuna, I don't think regulated gamefishing tackle would ever stop one. Most big yellowfin are found in very deep water and trying to change their direction will test the best anglers. As for new chums, well, they won't know what hit them!

Yellowfin tuna have a world-wide distribution but the biggest concentrations are found

in the western Pacific Ocean, particularly around spring when a spawning aggregation occurs in the fertile waters of the Coral Sea. Over the years this area north-east of Cairns and south of Papua New Guinea has been the centre of a number of surveys on yellowfin tuna. Even as far back as 1965 a tagging program and aerial research was undertaken by the CSIRO to determine the movements of these yellowfin.

Questions have been asked for more than a decade as to what happened to the once abundant east-coast stocks that were caught by both local longliners and sportfishers. The most consistent grounds where large yellowfin were once caught were reefs inside the continental shelf in a stretch of coastline between NSW's Coffs Harbour and Eden. Looking at the old club records and annual reports from the Bermagui Gamefishing Club (once the 'yellowfin tuna capital' of Australia) indicate there were very few patchy seasons of big fish from the '50s to the '90s; the hey-days were between the '70s and '90s, when anglers and boat numbers grew in amazing proportions. Since the collapse of this inshore fishery in the mid-'90s the only reasonable catches along the NSW east coast seem to come from trolling lures along the deeper grounds of the continental shelf, or the much wider canyons.

Where are they now?

East coast anglers have to look wide and far to find a decent yellowfin these days. On top of that, we've had to change our tactics to catch them. Very little drifting, cubing or live baiting is done these days, unless a concentration of schooling tuna are found in a confined area. Most of the techniques involve trolling special lures the tuna switch onto such as jet-heads and bullet-heads. Deep underwater structures such as seamounts and canyons also hold the key to success on these tuna. Getting out to these wide grounds can be difficult for the average trailerboat fisher and weather conditions have to be studied very carefully—it's no fun being caught 30-odd miles out with a wind shift in a 5.5m boat, believe me! Any vessel planning to work the continental shelf and beyond must be set up to do so, preferably with twin engines and all the latest safety equipment on board.

Despite the stock's decline on the east coast, NSW still produces reasonable numbers of these tuna and wide of the old inshore stomping grounds between Bermagui and Greenwell Point is a productive area. Further north off Sydney, a seamount known as Browns Mountain in 250 fathoms (457m),

20 miles (32km) offshore; and Heaton's Hill, a huge canyon on the 1000 fathom (1.8km) line, 40 miles (64km) offshore, also produces reasonable catches. Another part of the NSW coast that produces yellowfin regularly is the extensive Red Rock Canyon and Nambucca Canyon off Coffs Harbour. The handy thing about these two deep-water grounds is they are only 16 to 18 miles (25 to 29km) offshore—perfect for the experienced trailerboat sportfisher! Further north from the Coffs grounds doesn't seem to create much conversation about targeted yellowfin activity.

Go troppo

Looking further afield, other areas where yellowfin can be found, perhaps more consistently, are around the South Pacific islands where the central Pacific yellowfin stocks seem to be in reasonable shape. Tropical destinations such as Vanuatu, Fiji, New Guinea and New Caledonia are all a short flight from our major east coast cities. Competition is making flights reasonably cheap and there are plenty of local charter boats available that won't break the budget for a group of anglers. It's exciting fishing and having a few anglers on board can be beneficial if multiple strikes occur when fishing schools.

Stand up and be counted

Catching and fighting yellowfin is still very popular on specialised stand-up tackle, 24kg being the most popular line class. Depending on where you're fishing and the time of year will determine what line class to chance and if the school fish are running around the 20 to 40kg range, 15kg tackle can be a fun, lighter option. Playing with anything lighter than 15kg can be a real test—current and water pressure can put the fish out of reach and a lot of time can be wasted fighting the stretch in the line. This is not good for the angler—or the fish, if it's to be released.

More anglers are chartering gamefishing vessels to fish for yellowfin, which makes sense when you consider the distances involved in finding them. Larger vessels are safer and more comfortable if the weather blows up, and the rates split between a few anglers is not too expensive. Vessels that specialise in tuna fishing supply all the tackle, but anglers who like to use their own gear are always welcome to do so. Simply inform the captain when you make the booking.

Jets and bullets

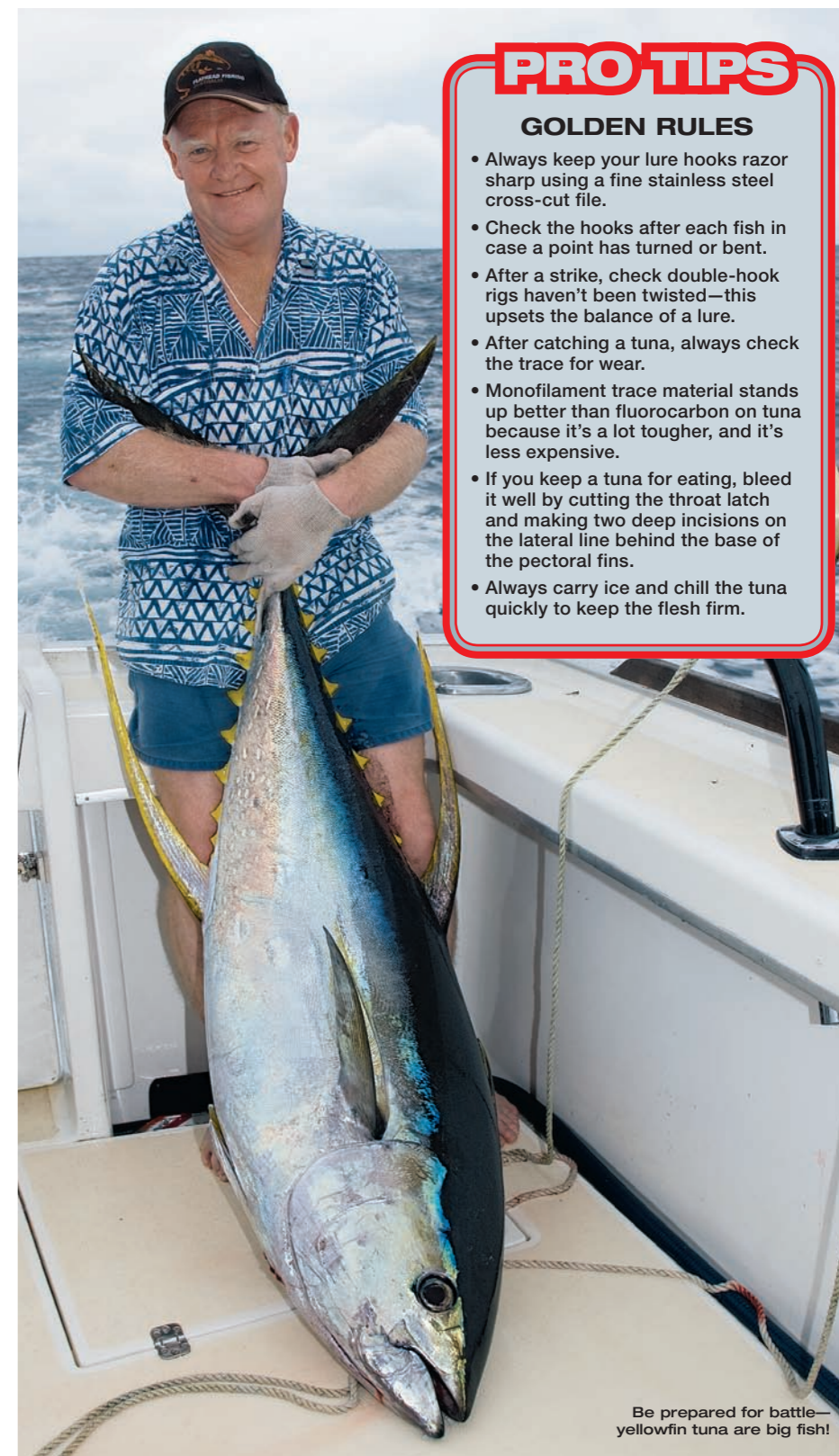
Lures are the key for consistent yellowfin success and there are a few techniques worth



It's not uncommon for yellowfin to break the surface when feeding—this fish hit the target but dropped its meal mid-flight.



You can't hide your smile when gold emerges from under the boat.



PRO TIPS

GOLDEN RULES

- Always keep your lure hooks razor sharp using a fine stainless steel cross-cut file.
- Check the hooks after each fish in case a point has turned or bent.
- After a strike, check double-hook rigs haven't been twisted—this upsets the balance of a lure.
- After catching a tuna, always check the trace for wear.
- Monofilament trace material stands up better than fluorocarbon on tuna because it's a lot tougher, and it's less expensive.
- If you keep a tuna for eating, bleed it well by cutting the throat latch and making two deep incisions on the lateral line behind the base of the pectoral fins.
- Always carry ice and chill the tuna quickly to keep the flesh firm.

Be prepared for battle—yellowfin tuna are big fish!

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The action can be hectic when yellowfin are on the chew.



Carry a range of lures in different colours.

pointing out for the newcomers. When selecting lures for tuna, the scooped-faced jet-heads and bullet-heads shown hereabouts are among the best, and medium cut-faced heads are also good. Brighter colours with yellow and green, and silver, blue and red combinations are popular. Chrome jet-heads with multi-coloured tinsel in the skirts also work very well. One important thing when rigging tuna lures: never go too heavy with the trace material; yellowfin have a keen eye, plus heavy trace or leader can prevent some lures from working properly.

I rig different size traces for different size tackle because the pressure applied from the tackle has an effect on the wear and tear of the trace. For example, on 37kg tackle I'll use a minimum of a 100kg trace, but for 15 to 24kg tackle I'll come down to around the 70kg trace. Long doubles or wind-on leaders are also preferred for tuna fishing so the angler can control the fish around the boat a little easier in the final stages.

Big 'fin

It's rare for a big yellowfin to bust up on lures running close to the boat, but it does hap-

pen. It's usually in a situation where the tuna are thick and competing for food, wanting to eat every lure in the spread. More often it's the lures set on the shotgun (the one down the middle in the longest position) or the longer outrigger lures that get smashed. Always troll to the sea conditions, not just at any set speed or engine revs. The idea is to get the lures smoking and skipping a little, but not jumping right out of the water. You will find the jets and bullet type heads work better with a touch more speed than certain cut-faced lures; it's a matter of selecting the right combination of lures that will work well together. In other words, it's no point having a lure like the 'Tube' pattern, with a very sharp, angled cut on the head that's going to fly out of the water, while the other lure are tracking straight and true.

Drag settings are also important and need to be addressed before the lures go in the water. Setting reel drags is a simple procedure using a set of scales—the kind available at all tackle stores. These scales have a hook at one end and a handle at the other and it's just a matter of hooking the scales to the swivel and pulling the line off the reel when it's

set on the strike drag position. The pressure needed to start moving line off the spool will be shown on the scales and to adjust the drag tension up or down is just a matter of turning the drag adjusting knob. The correct pressure on the strike button should be one-third the breaking strain of the line (for example, 5kg for 15kg line or 8kg for 24kg line). Another little tip, when a big tuna really starts to strip a lot of line off the reel you must ease the drag lever back a little as the spool diameter diminishes, otherwise you will break the line!

These drag variations have to be thought about carefully during the excitement of the hook-up and the fight, otherwise the long-awaited fish of a lifetime will be busted off. If the tuna takes a lot of line and goes straight down, it can even be an advantage to move the vessel away from the fish to obtain some angle on the line. Fighting a tuna—or any gamefish for that matter—straight up and down doesn't work. The angle on the line will help you turn the fish towards the surface. Big yellowfin in particular will go deep and get into a stubborn circling pattern and if you don't try to change this early, the fight time could be long and tough.

Fishing with an experienced angler can help a newcomer immensely. Being shown how to work the tackle with the right type of rod bucket and harness is important, as these tough tuna can put a lot of hurt on your body if the gear is not set up correctly. Once you know how the tackle works, it makes the later purchase of your own equipment much easier. And once you work out the finer details of using stand-up tackle, you will be surprised what you can catch!

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