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Bluefin Summer

Will we live to see another tuna invasion like this?

By Ted Williams

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The warm, overcast morning of September 11, 2004, has become a reference point in my life. Alone at daybreak, two miles out of Chatham, Massachusetts, in my 21-foot Contender, the Assignment, I'd seen a cloud of birds over busting fish. I assumed they were bluefish, but just to make sure they weren't stripers, I grabbed the spinning rod and fired out a hookless torpedo plug. As it landed a gleaming bluefin tuna of perhaps 80 pounds pounced on it like a mousing coyote.

Attacking the ancient, overfilled Fin-Nor reel verbally and with a screwdriver, I excavated the leader, set up my 12-weight Sage, and tied on a Jellyfish--the white, wing-flapping concoction of legendary Montauk guide and raconteur David Blinken. For the next three hours I chased tight pods of tuna. They didn't race around like albies but, save for rare breaches, rolled lazily or cruised just below the surface like sluiced pulp logs. The sweet, fruity scent of sand eels whole and chopped hung on the soft south wind. Finally three beasts about the size of the first one I'd seen appeared under my fly just as it hit the water. The middle one sucked it in.

I could beat the fish on this gear, given generous measures of luck and knowledge--neither of which I possessed on that day. The first mistake I made was to follow--steering, reeling, hauling down the radio antenna and extra fly rods, reaching over the high side to flip the line off a lobster buoy. When they swim tuna oxygenate, and if you follow before you have to, they'll go on forever. My second mistake was trying to herd the fish away from a cluster of lobster pots. It worked the first time, not the second. Now, an hour after hookup and nine miles seaward, the fish doubled back, creating so much slack I couldn't keep the backing out of the prop when I plunged the rod into the water. They could hear my screams in Chatham.

Cut to August 2005. I receive a phone call from Richard Reagan--creator of the famed Albie Whore (similar to the Jellyfish, but with wings plastered to the sides with hot glue) and, in his lesser role, president and fellow board member of the Norcross Wildlife Foundation. Richard Reagan--the man who until this very minute had defined flyrodding for bluefins as "a boat ride," but who guided by Blinken, had just landed seven off Rhode Island. "No one lands seven tuna in one day," I informed him. But he insisted it was true; and from across the room, barely audible over the clinking ice in their single malts, Blinken backed him up. For most of the day they'd been surrounded by vast schools that churned the water white. I ordered Reagan and his able assistant, Capt. John McMurray (a saltwater flyrod guide on weekends), to appear at my house the next evening. Reagan offered the lame excuse of work.

But at 5:30 am on August 9 McMurray and I splashed the Assignment at Galilee, Rhode Island. The fog that had worried us all the way down lifted a hundred yards from the ramp. Two miles out McMurray yelled, "Tuna!" I wasn't convinced. Then tuna erupted all around us, sending up showers of one-inch peanut bunker. Nothing lazy about these fish. They didn't roll or cruise; they slashed and leapt, frequently clearing the water. We could see their geysers a mile away. I eased the Assignment

to the edge of the nearest school, and McMurray laid down one of the Albie Whores Reagan had tied for us.

"There he is," he shouted after his third strip. Backing poured out of his reel, but I resisted the temptation to follow; and when I had to follow, the fish shot toward us. Three other boats arrived. Blinken hailed us on the radio. New schools popped up at all compass points, and the brightening sun turned the peanut bunker into welding sparks. McMurray, using a reel with no anti-reverse, switched hands, holding his 9-weight briefly with his bloody left and shaking his right.

These were two-year-old tuna--20 to 35 pounds--and most likely progeny of the big 1994 year class. Every flyrodder wants to tangle with an older fish, as I had the previous year, but they'll tie up the boat for three hours and the chances they'll survive aren't great. Even to target bluefins a boat owner/operator needs a "highly migratory" permit available for $22 from the highly unfriendly Web site of the National Marine Fisheries Service (www.nmfspermits.com) or by phoning 888-872-8862. Guests fish free. Size and bag limits (which apply to boat, not individual anglers) change according to harvest, so keep checking the Web site. During most of the summer of 2005 a boat was allowed to kill one fish per day between 27 and 72 inches fork length. You must report every tuna landed at the same number (press 1 to avoid an endless stream of BS). Even if you don't have a tuna in your boat when you're checked, you're going to have to do some fancy talking if you don't have a permit and someone has been casting a tarpon rod with a big, anti-reverse reel.

Fifty minutes after McMurray struck his fish I hoisted it by the leader and hard tail and laid it on the gunwale tape. It measured 33 inches from lip to fork. Calico flanks were hard and cold, seemingly scaleless and with barely any slime. Horizontal stabilizers jutted from the caudle peduncle. Fins folded into groves that facilitated speed bursts of at least 55 mph. Double-hinge jaws swung the mouth out as well as open. Gills were immense. Instead of pumping water through their gills like lesser fish, tuna reverse the process, pushing their gills through the water, mouths agape, supercharging their warm, blood-rich muscles like ramjets. Tunas lack air bladders, so they must swim every minute of their lives; restrained, they suffocate and drown. When you run your hand over their brows you can sometimes feel the light-sensing window used for navigation. Paired arteries and veins with opposite directions of flow act as heat exchangers and barriers to heat loss.

When I bled this fish its enormous heart shot thick pulses of blood into a five-gallon bucket, and when I gutted it I could feel the body heat. You don't kill one of these highly advanced wanderers of our planet casually, but you don't need to don ashes and sackcloth if you do. These are the babies; and, even before predation by humans, very few make it to spawning age.

McMurray's fish taught us two lessons: 1) Anything under a 12-weight is going to hurt you and the fish; and 2) do your best not to let any object, even the tape measure, touch a tuna; the scaleless appearance is an illusion. Scales come off easily, leaving a gel of gray dust on anything they contact.

With our daily limit iced down, I manned the bow while McMurray steered us into another school and phoned his young wife, Danielle, a gourmet chef, instructing her to relay recipes for tuna rolls and sushi to my wife, Donna. I missed four strikes before I hooked up. With the 12-weight I had the fish, a clone of our first, to the boat in 30 minutes. It seemed in good shape, and McMurray held it high by the tail and dropped it into the water, giving it a jump-start and a quick charge of oxygen. That fish taught us that you need the thickest of hooks. The seemingly stout one on the Albie Whore was badly bent.

More boats appeared, but we still had fish to ourselves, and with the quiet four-stroke we could cruise into the middle of them without putting any down. I have always envied the willpower that, in these situations, allows McMurray to rack his rod and pick up his camera. And I envy his results. When he resumed casting a bluefin provided a particularly painful lesson, especially for McMurray--i.e., that improved clinch knots tied (at least by me) on 25-pound flurocarbon come unwrapped. Use a loop knot.

After each of us had landed another fish, we were no longer intimidated. You just have to accept the fact that you will always lose 200 yards of backing in the first 15 seconds.

As we moved east we encountered larger schools and fewer boats. "God, look at that blitz," yelled McMurray, spinning the wheel and swatting the throttle. I pooh-poohed him when he suggested trying the little crease flies we use for albies in low light. But tuna devoured them on their way down from arcing vaults.

At 5:00, with 11 fish to the boat, McMurray inquired if I thought we should "call it a day."

"Are you crazy?" I demanded. "You and I may never live to see this again." But the action faded with the light, and we were driven off the water by darkness. We filleted our fish in my barn and saved every scrap. Donna had the sushi and tuna rolls ready by 11:00--by far the best we'd ever had. The stuff you order at restaurants is flash-frozen, the better to kill parasites (virtually non-existent in small bluefins); and the minimum commercial limit is 72 inches.

"To hell with any assignment that doesn't float," I told McMurray. "I'm on these fish twice a week till they leave. So how about Thursday?" It was the easiest sell I ever made. But Richard Reagan had an important commitment that day and needed McMurray to fill in at the office.

So there I was at 5:30 am on August 11, 2005, alone on a fog-shrouded Rhode Island Sound, listening for birds and fish, eyes glued to the GPS. Finally, I made out whitewater close by my starboard beam and promptly hooked and landed a fine fish. I steamed due south, searching for an opening. Then halfway to Block Island, I passed abruptly into bright sunlight and glassy water broken in a dozen spots by schools of bunker-gorging bluefins. I saw storm petrels dancing on the water and small tunoids racing west--almost certainly green bonito.

"Hey Ted," came a clear voice on the radio. "Are you in fog?" It was Capt. Amanda Switzer, the famous Montauk guide and movie star (at least on the ESPN series "Guide House").

"Only figuratively," I replied. "Head straight for Block." And in 10 minutes her white Parker broke into the sunlight like the slow-motion TV ad footage of the passenger jet nosing out of the cloud layer. In the bow, wearing his trademark orange fleece and flailing his right arm like the drowned Ahab, was Richard Reagan. "Haar, Teddy," he called. "I seek the bluefin tuna." At noon Amanda radioed to tell me he'd blown up a rod.

It was the best 15 hours of fishing I've ever had. I try not to count fish, but you can't help it with tuna--14 hooked, 12 landed. I learned a lot about bluefins that day: that their little teeth can make your thumb and forefinger look like you used them to stop the wire brush on an electric grinder, that

unhooking them is infinitely harder with no one to hold them for you, that when they get under your boat (as they always do after 15 or 20 minutes) you need to raise your motor (and then remember to lower it before you start it again), that it is absolutely impossible to land a bluefin alone unless you slack off, throw down your rod, and grab the leader. And, finally, I learned what it must feel like to play 60 minutes of tackle football with no pads.

McMurray, a patron of the fly-fishing forum www.reeltime.com, wrote up our adventure, eliciting an immediate e-mail to me from the Socrates of Yankee striper guides, Capt. Doug Jowett. "Get down here fast," I ordered. "You and I may never live to see this again." We had a good day on Rhode Island Sound durring which Jowett blew up a 14-weight rod 200 yards from shore but landed the fish handily with the butt section. And we had an epic day on Cape Cod Bay in lightning and driving rain, amid whales, lunging sheerwaters and huge, frothing schools of tuna which, more often than not, stayed with us all the time we were hooked up, then vanished like summer love. We learned that 20-pound tippets aren't enough because bluefins can bust them with zero rod pressure merely by dragging line and backing at warp speed.

After Jowett sacrificed his shoulder to a 50-pounder, which he beat despite the pain and which proved the best fish of the summer, I took the Assignment's bow for the rest of the day, mumbling a brief and feeble protest. When fish spurned my Jellyfish, Jowett passed me one of his Bunny Flies, and I was tight on the first cast. But it was the next school that taught us the lesson because it spurned the Bunny Fly and jumped all over the Jellyfish.

The tuna stayed around till November, but we encountered only lazy rollers. Jowett's clients had a few to the boat, but no one aboard the Assignment hooked up again.

There are all kinds of plausible theories for the tuna invasion of 2005, none of which is good management. A law--written by and for the commercial fishermen of the East Coast Tuna Association--mandates that US tuna regs can't be more restrictive than international ones. And the fishmongers and politicians who run the international management body (the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) have looked after the species like 19th Century bison hunters. In 2005, when the East Coast Tuna Association failed to kill its quota of giants in Cape Cod Bay (despite its "gentleman's agreement" not to go there), it sought and received permission from the National Marine Fisheries Service to plunder the fish off North Carolina. There have been no good year classes since 1994, and none coming along from before. The 2001 bluefin biomass (the last measured) was 13 percent of what it was in 1975.

I wish I could be more sanguine, but my theory is that lots of bait blew into Rhode Island Sound. As for Cape Cod Bay, you can find a few bluefins there most every summer, and perhaps Jowett and I, for once, hit it right. Finally, what I believe most fervently--not a theory but a postulate--is the mantra we chanted all summer: "We may never live to see this again." That, of course, could apply equally to the sunrise. So if the tuna show up in 2006, get your priorities straight and chase them.