



Big Game Bites

An artificial approach for getting started in offshore fishing. - By Jeff Merrill

If you're new to offshore fishing, you might be surprised to learn that some of the best big game fishing opportunities in the world can be found off the mid-Atlantic coast. Five species of billfish, numerous species of tuna, and dozens of species of sharks as well as wahoo, mahi-mahi and king mackerel can be found along offshore structure edges. State record books reveal some impressive catches over the years with numerous blue marlin records of over 1000 pounds, white marlin topping the century mark, big eye and yellowfin tuna over 300 and 200 pounds respectively recorded between New York and North Carolina. Throw into the mix the rebound of the recreational swordfish fishery and it's easy to see why the Western Atlantic ranks among the world's best when it comes to offshore fishing thanks to the irregular bottom contour offshore created by deep drop-offs, holes, ledges and sloping hills attract which provide cover for tons of forage species such as squid, tinker mackerel and other small baitfish. Here are a few tips to get you started this coming season. We'll focus on trolling artificial lures since they offer the best

chance for the newcomer to score with most of the species they'll encounter.

By far, the most important aspect to any offshore fishing trip is safety. For the most part we're talking about encounters with big fish using relatively heavy tackle with large lures/baits, hooks and heavy leaders anywhere from 30 to well over 100 miles offshore where a severe injury could have deadly consequences. Be sure your vessel is up to an offshore trip and that all necessary safety equipment is available and in good condition and if you don't already own one, consider the purchase of a life raft and a SAT phone.

While encounters with large fish are indeed possible, unless you are fishing in an area known for big blue marlin or giant bluefin tuna, 80- and 130-pound class tackle is unnecessary and in fact can be more of a hindrance than a help due to its size and weight and experience needed to use it properly. A straight butt 50-pound class trolling rod matched with a 50-pound class wide spool reel loaded with 600 yards of 80 pound monofilament is more than adequate for the task. Lever drag reels are preferred over star drag

models of equal size because of a larger drag surface area that dissipates heat faster while also allowing for multiple drag setting. Regardless of what size reels or pound-test line, set drags at 25 to 33 per-cent of the breaking strength of the line. Stay away from bent butt rods on anything below 80-pound class gear. Aside from a blue marlin, most tuna and billfish encountered in the mid-Atlantic region will rarely top 200 pounds so most battles will be done standing up especially when multiple hook-ups occur and 50-pound class outfits will easily handle these fish.

High speed trolling lures offer the novice the best opportunity to score with pelagics since they can be purchased pre-rigged with hooks and leaders and allow for trolling at higher speeds to cover more ground to locate gamefish. Choosing lures of a size and color scheme that match forage species found in the area of the targeted gamefish will draw more strikes and straight running lures in the six to 12-inch range have proven to be the most effective. For instance, green and yellow combinations




imitate mahi-mahi while purple and black with silver resemble skipjack and false albacore. Blue and white color schemes look like flying fish while pink and white look like squid. Some of our favorites that have seen duty from New Jersey to the Bahamas that have caught everything from big eye tuna to blue marlin as well as mahi-mahi and wahoo include Mold Craft Wide Range, Super Chugger and

Reel Tight, Pakula Sprockets, Roaches and Long Shots and Black Bart Abaco Prowler, Super Pro Jet, Super Plunger and all of their Breakfast series.

To be effective, lures must also be placed properly in the trolling pattern and most crews will fish six or seven rods. Outriggers rigged with double pulleys and long and short release clips allow two lines to be pulled from each 'rigger. Rods are numbered one through seven and placed in a rod holder with the same number after a strike to expedite resetting the pattern after a bite. Lures should run on the face of the wake without coming out of the water and track straight while creating trails of "smoke" as the lure breaks the surface, gathers air and disappears under the surface. With a seven rod pattern the two flat lines are clipped off release clips on the transom and place on the second wake. Short 'riggers are place on the third or fourth wake, while long 'riggers are placed on the sixth wake and the center rod is set in the fighting chair with the lure on the seventh wake. Boat size, hull configuration and sea conditions will dictate trolling speed but consider seven to 10 knots a good starting point and adjust throttles until lures look natural. Note the RPM's and re-set to that mark after a strike.

Structure plays an important role in locating gamefish and your GPS will direct your vessel to the productive structure while your color scope will verify bottom contour and locate bait and gamefish. Structure edges attract bait and, in turn, larger predator species. Work back and fourth across structure edges starting on the higher bottom and work to the deeper water and back across to the "flats" again. Keep an eye on your sea surface temperature gauge and note and changes in water temperature while looking for birds, slicks, rips, schools of bait scattering across the surface and water color changes. Floating debris will almost always yield mahi-mahi and large weedlines can produce all species of gamefish.

The bite is one of the most exciting parts of big game fishing. When a fish strikes, hit the MOB button on the GPS

so you'll have a reference point to come back to after the fish is boated, released or lost. Clear all lines that haven't been hit keeping in mind multiple bites by tuna and mahi-mahi often occur. Have the angler fight the fish with the drag lever no higher than the strike position. Remember during a battle with a large fish that's taken a lot of line you may have to back off the drag a bit since extra drag will be placed on all the line that's in the water. As line is regained the drag can be pushed back up to strike. Gloves must be used to grab any leader with a hand over hand motion while pulling the fish within gaffing range. As the leader is grabbed, instruct the angler to back off on the drag slightly in case the fish lunges away from the boat and the leader is let go. Try to sink the gaff in the head area of tuna, wahoo and mahi-mahi to avoid damaging the meat of the fish. Once on the deck, slide the catch into the fish box head first and cover with plenty of ice. Get the lines back in the water because you never know when the next bite will occur. Along the mid-Atlantic coast it could be the fish of a lifetime! 

If you think you've got what it takes to compete against some of the best in the big game fishing business you may want to sample one or more of the many big game tournaments that take place during July and August in the mid-Atlantic region. Here's some information on the region's best events.

Ocean City Tuna Tournament
Ocean City, Maryland – July 12-15

Mid-Atlantic Tuna Tournament
Cape May, New Jersey – July 18-21

Dare County Boat Builders Challenge
Manteo, North Carolina – July 20-22

White Marlin Open
Ocean City, Maryland – August 6-10

Pirate's Cove Billfish Tournament
Manteo, North Carolina – August 13-17

Mid-Atlantic \$500,000
Cape May, New Jersey – August 19-24

Virginia Beach Billfish Tournament
Virginia Beach, Virginia – August 22-25