

North Carolina

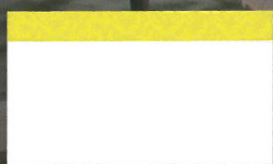
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(continued)

Bluewater fishing breaks
loose this month in the offshore
waters of the Crystal Coast.
Here's what to expect.

Crystal Blue

By John D. Silva



Brian Carroll

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(continued)

The

seasonal rise in ocean temperature off the coast around Atlantic

Beach and Morehead City means the peak offshore fishing season has arrived at the Crystal Coast. These fertile waters feature some of the most-productive and diverse sportfishing in the country. During May and June each year, offshore waters burst with action.

"June is like prime time here," said Capt. Thomas Wood of *Dancin' Outlaw* Charters in Morehead City. "I'd put our fishing up against anybody's in the world."

As the warm waters of the Gulf Stream — which typically flow about 30 to 40 miles off the coast — move closer to shore, prized gamefish such as dolphin, sailfish, tuna, wahoo and marlin follow these fluctuating temperature patterns. Searching for these gamefish in a wide expanse of bluewater, veteran captains like Wood rely heavily on previous day's experience as well as word-of-mouth reports. In lieu of any positive firsthand accounts, there are always other ways of finding fish.

"If I had absolutely no information to go with from the day before, I would normally go to 30 or 40 fathoms of water, maybe start somewhere around the Big Rock," said Wood. "But every day is so different.... It changes by the hour."

As a rule, offshore anglers will look for water temperatures ranging in the 70s. They also rely heavily on weather charts and satellite images, continually analyzing and searching for the slightest temperature changes that attract baitfish and predator fish.

"I don't look for a specific temperature as much as I look for a temperature change," said Wood. "As you get along in the summer, the changes become less and less

evident. I use temperature gages a lot."

Wood believes that the more temperature-sensing electronics he has onboard, the better his ability to detect even the most-minute temperature changes.

"When you get into June and July, when the water's warmed up, the temperature out there only changes by measures in tenths of a degree," he said. "All day, the temperature may only be a 1-degree, 2-degree variance, and you're looking for tenths (of a degree) in changes. If you've got a change of temperature, there's something going on there."

When targeting these bluewater gamefish, most charter captains prefer trolling, which helps them cover a wide area of water. Variations in tackle and technique are based on personal preference and past results.

Wood deploys a spread of surface baits, primarily ballyhoo, and he runs them on very long lines. The baits he sets up in the wake use up about half a spool on a Tiagra 50 reel.

"A normal day of fishing this time of year, you can have your dolphin and wahoo spreads out and have one big bait out for blue marlin. And nine times out of 10, if the marlin comes into the spread, you can usually get him to focus on your big bait. So you can marlin fish and still catch a lot of other stuff at the same time, which is pretty cool."

Wood typically uses Shimano Tiagra 30s, 50s, 80s and 130, but when a sailfish or a white marlin crashes the spread, he always has a pitch-back bait ready to go.

"We try to catch them on a PLD, a little Shimano (combo). Ideally, we try to match the fish with the tackle. We don't always get it," he laughed. "Sometimes you drop it back there, you think it's a sailfish, and it turns out to be a 300-pound marlin. I've done that before. But catching a sail or a white on light tackle is a ball."

Wahoo are commonly caught in May and June, and are much more likely to hit lures trolled beneath the surface.



Capt. Bill Williamson is the retired captain of the *Fishn' Warrior*, a 33-foot Grady White 330 who, like Wood, believes that when it comes to offshore success, surface trolling with natural bait is the surest ticket to success.

"Most of these fish feed on the surface," said Williamson, "and that's where we pull the baits. We'll put a little quarter-ounce chin weight on the rig so it will run from just under the surface, to just skipping on top. We troll anywhere from 6 to 7 ½ knots, and we try to fish temperature breaks, structure, grass lines and, of course, baitfish. That's the most important thing, if we can find baitfish."

Using primarily ballyhoo, Williamson runs seven or eight baits near the surface, using a spread of heavy conventional bait rods offset in an assortment of rod holders and outriggers, both inside and outside of the boat's wake. The ballyhoo come from Florida, frozen and shipped north.

"I'll get them prepared the day before," said Williamson. "I thaw them out. Then I break their backs and get them (flexible enough) to where they look like they are swimming in the water."

The baits are neatly positioned in a single layer on a bait tray and placed in a cooler over ice. Next, Williamson sprinkles kosher or brine salt or over the top of the baits to toughen them up so they don't wash out or tear as easily. The next day, the baits are ready to be rigged and put into action.

The Big Rock is a big deal

From the literary era of Ernest Hemmingway, to the early days of television to the fast paced, technical-savvy offshore anglers of the 21st century, the blue marlin reigns as one of the most storied big-game sportfish on the Atlantic seaboard.

Each year, Atlantic Beach and, Morehead City fill up with boats and crews visiting to compete in the Big Rock Marlin Tournament. This year's tournament, the 56th annual, will be held June 6-14.

Veteran captains, crews and big-game anglers pay entry fees of up to \$18,000 to pit their skills against these formidable fighting fish at cash prizes that can approach a million dollars.

Last year, Capt. Buddy Hooper of Hatteras and the crew of the *Hatteras Fever II* won almost a half-million dollars for bringing to the scales the winning fish, a 465.3-pound blue. The all-time record fish was an 831-pounder caught in 2000 by Summer-time Blues, a boat based in Kiawah Island, S.C.

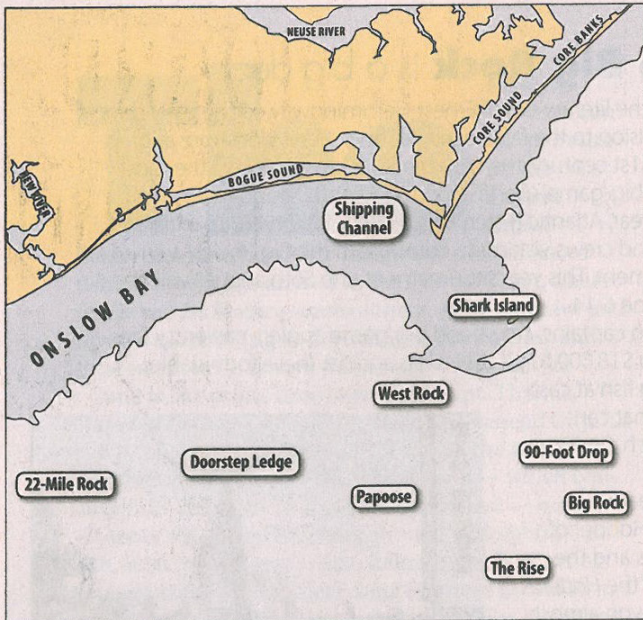
Cash prizes go to the three largest blue marlin brought to the scales that weigh at least 400 pounds, along with daily prizes and prizes in tuna, dolphin and wahoo categories.



The *Hatteras Fever II* won last year's Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament with this 465.3-pound blue marlin.

Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament





DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE/WHEN TO GO — The Morehead City/Atlantic Beach area is most easily accessed via US 70, which crosses North Carolina from west to east. US 17 is one route that brings people in from north or south, through New Bern. The offshore season for dolphin, tuna, wahoo and billfish heats up in May and June.

TACKLE/TECHNIQUES — Heavy trolling outfits used with outriggers for surface trolling or trolling with planers are common. Baits and lures include chuggers, llanders, cone rigs or sea witches rigged with ballyhoo.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Capt. Joe Shute, 800-868-0941, www.captjoes.com; Fin Hunter Sportfishing, 252-622-6108, www.moreheadcitysportfishingcharters.com. See also Guides and Charters in Classifieds.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Crystal Coast Tourism Authority Morehead City, 252-726-8148, www.crystalcoastnc.org; Carteret County Chamber of Commerce, Morehead City, 252-726-6350, www.nccoastchamber.com.

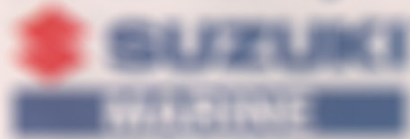
MAPS — Capt. Segull's Nautical Charts, 888-473-4855, www.captainsegullcharts.com; Sealake Fishing; Guides, 800-411-0185, www.thegoodspots.com; Maps Unique, 910-458-9923, www.mapsunique.com.



John D. Silva

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