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THE BLUEWATER PURSUIT

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BEAUFORT INLET

NORTH CAROLINA'S OVERLOOKED HOT SPOT

BEST KNOWN FOR BEING THE HOME OF THE BIG ROCK, THE CRYSTAL COAST ALSO OFFERS FANTASTIC OPTIONS FOR OFFSHORE FISHING

BY RALEIGH P. WATSON



I REMEMBER IT LIKE IT WAS YESTERDAY: IT WAS JUNE 1993, AND I WAS 9 YEARS OLD. MY DAD, PETER WATSON, ENTERED THE BIG ROCK BLUE MARLIN TOURNAMENT ON HIS 36-FOOT HATTERAS NAMED *CORRAL*. HE HAD NEVER CAUGHT A MARLIN ON ANY OF HIS BOATS, BUT HE ENTERED THE TOURNAMENT ON A WHIM PRIMARILY TO HAVE SOME FUN WITH HIS BUDDIES. IN FACT, HE DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A FULL SPREAD OF MARLIN LURES, SO HE TOOK THE ADVICE OF A MARINA STORE MANAGER AND WALKED OUT WITH A SET OF BLUE-AND-WHITE ILAND LURES.

It was the proverbial “pond” on the first day of the tournament. The excitement was high, but expectations were tempered, given the circumstances. We arrived to our spot a few minutes early, and we gently bobbed up and down as we waited for the clock to strike 9 a.m. Finally, my dad shouted, “Lines in!” from the bridge. The crew rapidly set out the spread of Iland lures rigged with ballyhoo, along with a single 13-inch bowling pin on each side for our teasers. I quickly climbed up the ladder to join my dad on the bridge. Barely able to get my chin over the rail, I kept my eyes on the spread even though I wasn’t entirely sure what I was hoping to see. Only a few minutes after our baits were set, four white marlin appeared behind the boat, one on each

teaser and each flat line. The fish danced around in our spread, lit up with an assortment of electric-blue colors only offshore fishermen can appreciate. The memory is etched in my mind, and to this day, it is the first moment I remember offshore. What happened next wasn’t a work of art, but we did catch one of those four fish. As fate would have it, we tacked on a blue before the end of the day.

Fast-forward 24 years and my family’s life revolves around offshore fishing, due in large part to that day when my dad caught his first blue marlin. Since then, I have been fortunate to fish in some incredible places over the years, but the more places I visit, the more I appreciate the diverse fishery Beaufort Inlet offers and the fishermen who call it home.

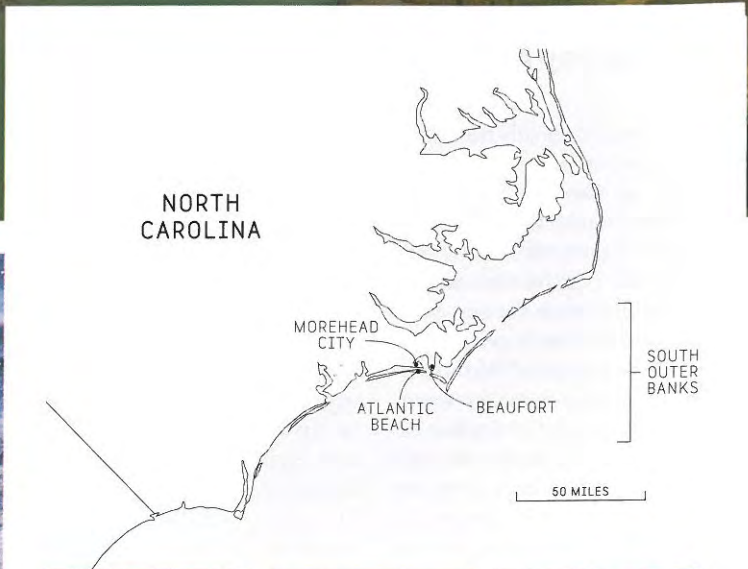
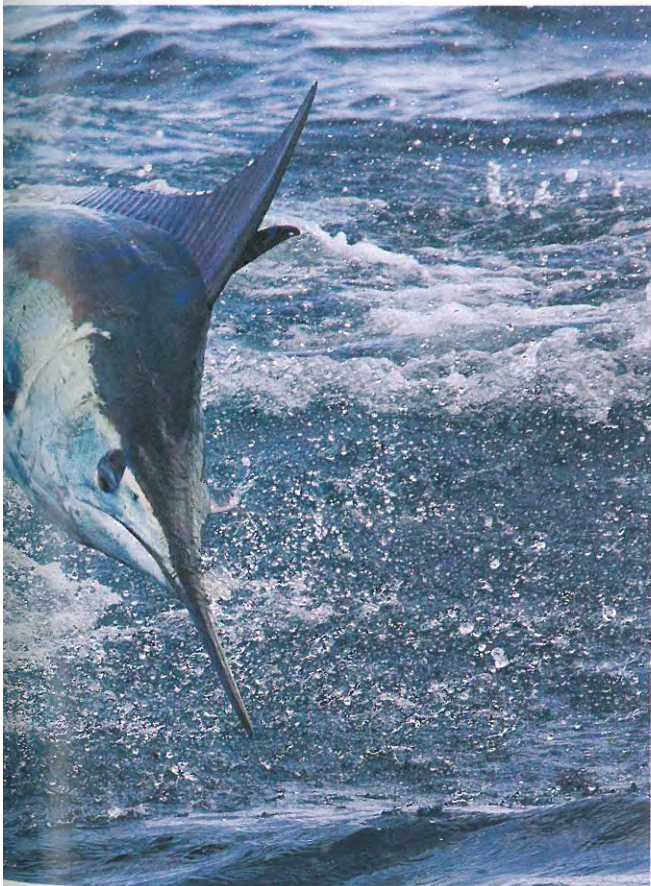
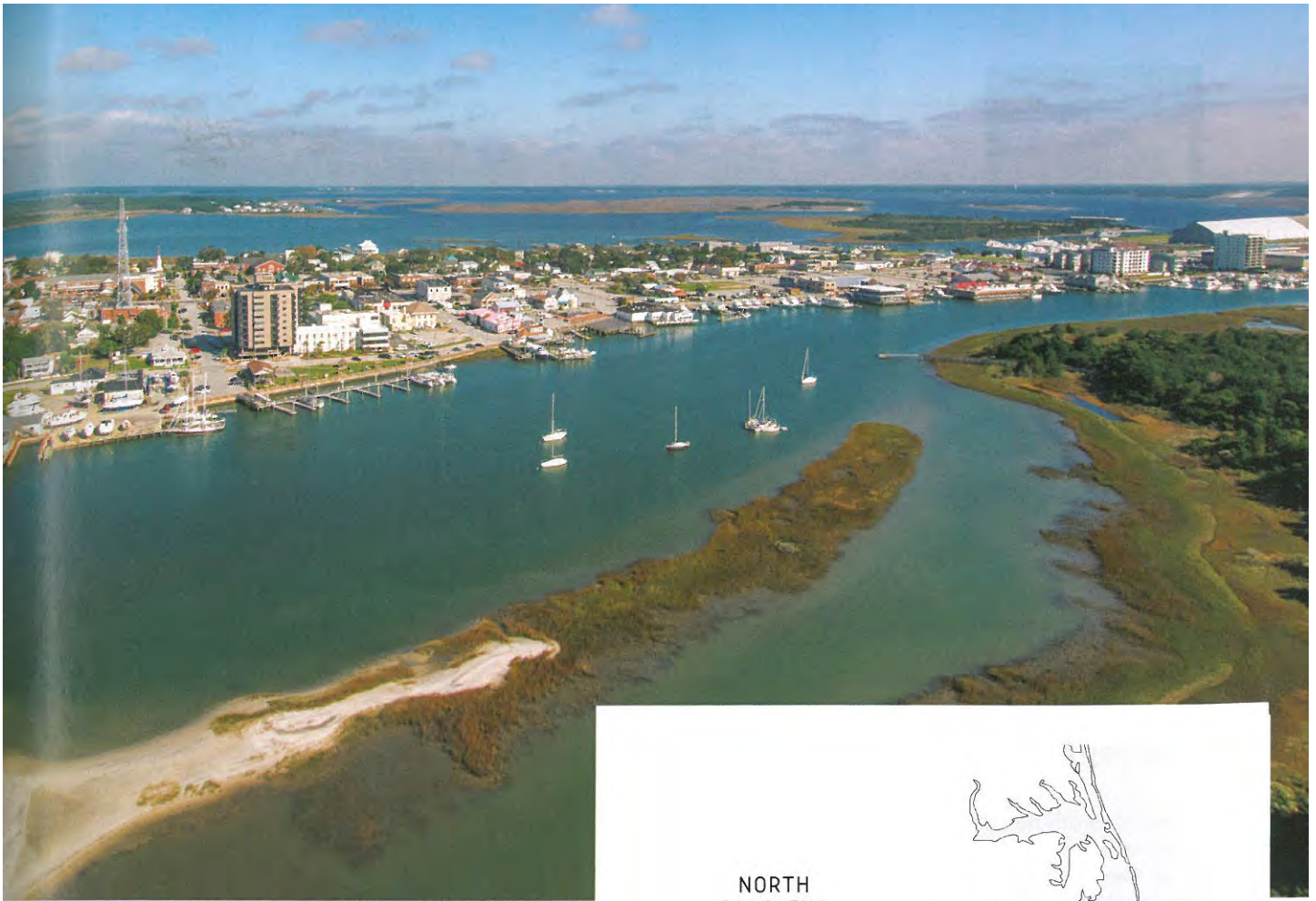
SURROUNDING AREA

North Carolina’s Beaufort Inlet is tucked away in the southern Outer Banks on one of the only south-facing beaches on the East Coast of the United States. The inlet supports a full-service port, so it is one of the safest inlets in the state to navigate due to the deeper shipping channel. A few small towns offer relatively quick and easy access to Beaufort Inlet, including Morehead City, Atlantic Beach and, of course, Beaufort.

Morehead City is the largest town in the area, and its economy continues to grow. The downtown area, however, has maintained its charming coastal presence, with a variety of restaurants, bars and shops nestled along the waterfront within walking distance from its world-class charter fleet. The Morehead



TOM SPENCER (TOP, OPPOSITE CENTER), RICHARD GIBSON (BOTTOM), JON WHITTLE (OPPOSITE 2)



Located in the southern Outer Banks, Beaufort Inlet is surrounded by the triad of Morehead City, Atlantic Beach and Beaufort, and it is centrally located to some of the best fishing grounds along the Eastern Seaboard. Iconic statues and landmarks line the waterfront in Morehead City, including the *Big Rock* marlin statue, the weigh station for the Big Rock Tournament and *The Carolina Sounder* memorial, which honors watermen from the community who lost their lives at sea.



The coastal towns around Beaufort Inlet are not only picturesque but offer a sense of community you can only experience in person. Each town offers a unique atmosphere packed with shops and restaurants to explore. Find a quiet place to unwind or spend time along the waterfront in Morehead City. When you're there, make sure to stop by the headquarters for the Big Rock.

waterfront is usually the place of choice when spending a night on the town, whether you want an intimate setting or a bustling bar with dancing and live music right on the water.

Atlantic Beach sits on a barrier island on the opposite side of the Intracoastal Waterway from Morehead City. The town boasts beautiful stretches of public beaches lined with colorful cottages, which come to life in the summer months. In addition to its own assortment of wonderful restaurants and bars, the town is also home to several marinas, including the famous Capt. Stacy Fishing Center, which sits directly on the Atlantic Beach Causeway and offers a respectable charter fleet in its own right.

The charming town of Beaufort is packed with history and is nestled among an assortment of coves, creeks and waterways. There is plenty of deepwater dockage at the town's municipal docks for transient boaters. The town is marked by a variety of

cozy shops and restaurants, while the landscape is full of small homes surrounded by oak and pine trees. There are several bed and breakfasts in town, which provide an authentic and relaxing lodging experience. Wild horses introduced to the area decades ago also reside near the town on the Rachel Carson Reserve and Shackleford Banks. The horses are a common tourist attraction, with tours offered by several guides in the area. Anyone visiting the southern Outer Banks should spend at least one day on the Beaufort waterfront to enjoy its pleasant Southern atmosphere.

Each town has its own unique characteristics, but the marine industry is an enormous part of the local economy in the entire region. The area is filled with tackle stores, marinas and shops providing a variety of marine services. It is also home to many boatbuilders, including Jarrett Bay, Shearline, Willis Boatworks, and Cap-N-Squid,

among others. It is certainly an interesting place to visit, especially for those who have a passion for the ocean and, particularly, the fishing industry.

MARLIN FISHING

You can target almost any pelagic species out of Beaufort Inlet, but the area is most recognized for its blue marlin fishing. The fishery is at its peak in May and June, but it is steady from April through mid-to-late September, when some of the largest fish have been caught on or around the full moon.

It is not uncommon to have multiple shots at blues in one day, especially in the peak summer months. Though most fish come from the 100-fathom curve or deeper, charter boats often see blue marlin while targeting dolphin and other meat fish in shallower. Dale Britt, owner and captain of the 52-foot Jarrett Bay charter boat *Sensation* in Morehead City, knows the fishery as well as anyone. "It



seems almost every day one of the charter boats hooks or catches a blue marlin, white marlin or sailfish, and we don't always have to fish deep," says Britt. "Just yesterday, I had the opportunity to watch a blue marlin put on a show behind *Diamond Girl*.



“It seems almost every day one of the charter boats hooks or catches a blue marlin, white marlin or sailfish, and we don’t always have to fish deep.”

And that fish was hooked in 40 fathoms.”

One thing I have come to appreciate over the years is the size of fish out of Beaufort Inlet — and the rest of North Carolina, for that matter. The blue marlin average approximately 300 pounds,

but larger fish are seen and caught frequently. In 1989, a grander was caught aboard *Wave Runner* with Howard Basnight at the helm. The fish weighed 1,002 pounds, and it remains the biggest blue marlin ever caught out of Beaufort Inlet.

THE BIG ROCK

Morehead City is also home to the Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament, which began in 1957. It has become one of the biggest fishing tournaments in the world and has offered a purse over \$1 million each of the past 16 years, attracting

anglers from all around the globe. Large crowds gather around the weigh station at the tournament’s waterfront headquarters daily, producing one of the most epic scenes in the sport-fishing industry. The experience of watching a boat back into the slip with a big blue will send chills down anyone’s spine. In the last five years, the average size of the winning fish has been 610 pounds; in 2015 alone, four fish over 500 pounds were brought to the docks, with the biggest being 680 pounds.

The Big Rock is probably the most fun week of the year, even if you’re not participating in the tournament. Crystal Hesmer, the director of the Big Rock, has run the tournament for the last 18 years and says: “The Big Rock is the best of the best, not only for participants and sponsors, but for the entire community. The air is electric with excitement for the winners as well as the

charities and organizations the tournament supports.” I share the same sentiment as Hesmer: I am not sure there is a marlin tournament anywhere in the world with a better combination of fishing, hospitality and pure fun.

Truth be told, targeting all species of billfish can be very productive here. Anglers routinely have shots at white marlin and sailfish throughout the spring and summer. Often, there is a run of both species in July and August, during which anglers can have multiple shots a day. The sailfishing in particular can be very good in the fall, and it’s not uncommon to see five or more a day in addition to a steady mix of bites from other pelagic species.

THE UNSUNG WAHOO

One of the best-kept secrets out of Beaufort Inlet is the world-class wahoo fishing. A convincing argument could be made that the area possesses the best wahoo fishing in the continental United States. Sure, it’s a

bold statement, but I believe it to be true, and I’d stack it up against other hot spots. Wahoo can be caught in solid numbers year-round, but the fishery is at its peak in the spring and fall. Huge numbers of fish are caught from September through November, and it’s common to have 20-plus bites a day throughout the fall season. Wahoo can be found from inside 100 feet to out in the deep, but generally speaking, the fish are targeted on “the break” between 30 and 60 fathoms. The average size of the wahoo in the area is about 30 pounds, but fish over 60 pounds are common.

The majority of wahoo out of Beaufort Inlet are caught on skirted ballyhoo combinations pulled at 6 to 8 knots. Darker colors are usually preferred, especially on overcast days, but brighter combinations can be equally effective, so most crews have an assortment of colors rigged and ready. In addition to a spread of baits on the surface, most captains also prefer to use



The Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament attracts anglers from all over, and tournament week adds energy and excitement to the area (below). Often overlooked because of the great billfishing, the wahoo fishery here rivals other hot spots (above).

a planer to get a bait or lure down deeper in the water column. High-speed trolling can also be an effective tactic, especially when trying to cover ground. The downfall is that it can limit bites from other types of species. It also increases fuel burn and can be a bit tougher on the crew, especially in rough seas, so most captains typically prefer to troll at slower speeds and use planers. It is not uncommon to catch tuna, dolphin or any species of billfish while

targeting wahoo on the break using this method.

Mike Webb, captain of charter boat *Pelagic*, knows the wahoo fishery in the area as well as anyone: “Sometimes the wahoo bites come on the surface baits, but other days, the fish might only bite baits deeper in the water column, and we almost always pull a planer when fishing the break. Wahoo can zone in on different depths, so sometimes we have to experiment with different planer sizes to find the fish. Once we locate the fish, the bite can be incredible. It really is a great wahoo fishery.”

A GREAT AREA AND A GREAT FISHERY

All things considered, Beaufort Inlet and its surrounding area should not be overlooked. The amazing fishery and the charming coastal towns certainly make this area worth a trip for anyone who has yet to visit. Anglers can bring their own boats or pick from the myriad charter boats in the area. Regardless of whether you wish to target billfish or fill the cooler with meat, Beaufort Inlet’s fishery is a great place to get the job done. 🎣

