

# WILMINGTON

## At The Ocean Oasis

### Don't stow your tuna gear just yet!

I suffer no illusions of being a master offshore angler – I'm addicted to too many other outdoor pursuits plus my wallet is way too light. But I do know these three things: 1) Tuna can turn on anytime, often when you least expect it; 2) Fighting big, nasty fish like a bigeye is most definitely a team effort, especially on stand-up gear, and; 3) when you get a last-minute invite, regardless of how cryptic, to fish overnight during a hot bite, ask no questions—just get to the dock on time.

#### OVERNIGHT ODYSSEY

It wasn't quite the stuff of "Mission Impossible," but when Capt. Karl Roscher of the charter boat "Hurricane" called to extend an invitation, he made sure he left out key details, save the when and where.

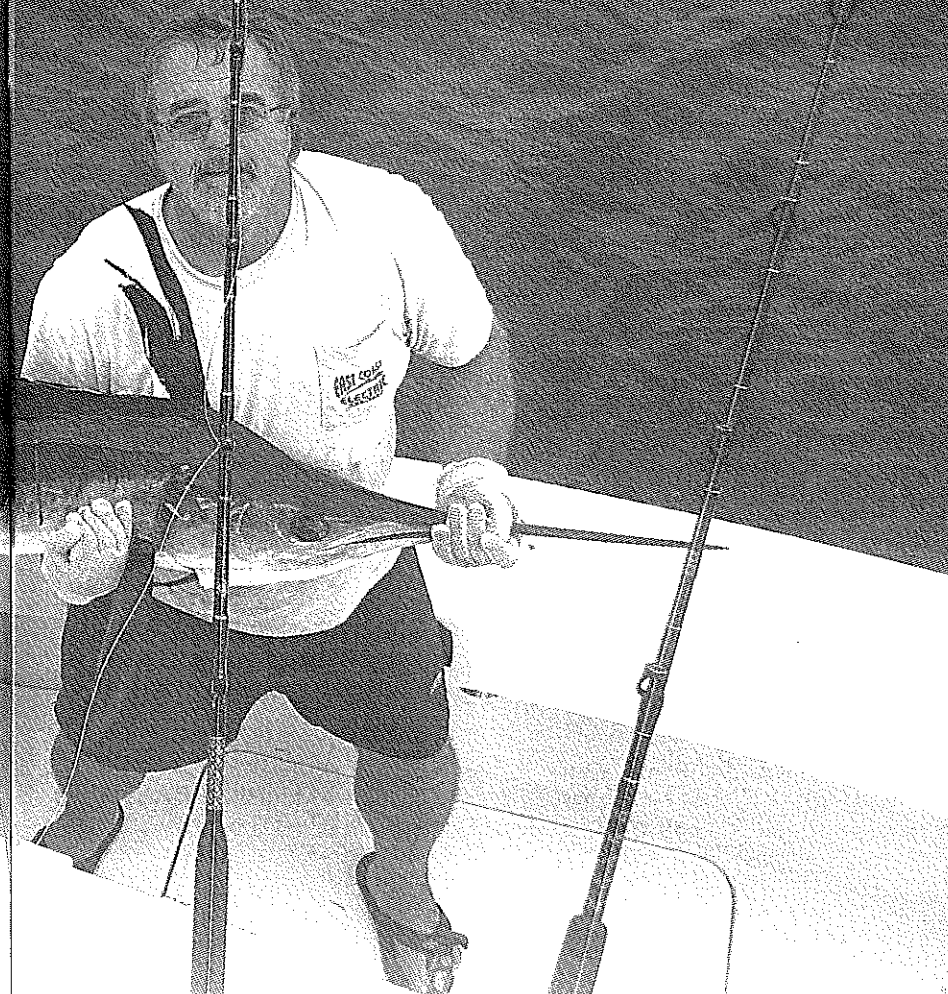
"Just be at the dock by 11 a.m.," he said flatly, ignoring my journalistic curiosity. "We're heading out for an over-nighter. The tuna and swords are snapping."

What salt-blooded angler could refuse such a tease? So the next day I loped down the dock at The Fisherman's Marina in West Ocean City, Maryland and, just when I was about to board Karl's 41-foot Viking, he called out and told me to keep walking.

Turns out I was to be part of a crew of five anglers who joined Capt. Ken Walsh of the "Hooked Up," which also included Ken's mate and co-captain Keith Lawson, "Hooked Up" mate Andy Nitkowski and Karl's mate Tony Congialdi.

After loading up hundreds of pounds of ice, bait, food, drink and other provisions for some 30 hours of offshore fishing, the fog of intrigue was finally lifted once we cleared

This 65-pound class white marlin topped off a very good trip.



Photos & text by C.D. Dollar

the inlet: we were heading to the Wilmington Canyon. I had heard earlier in the week both the Wilmington and Spencer canyons had produced a good swordfish and tuna bite but, of course, didn't expect to get out there so this trip was a welcomed bonus.

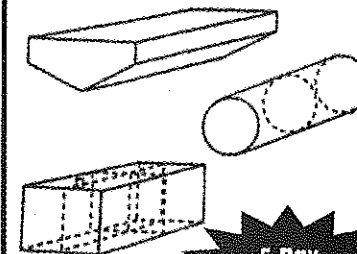
#### SLOW TROLL OUT

It's roughly 70 some miles from Ocean City Inlet to the fishing grounds of Wilmington Canyon, most of which was spent rigging chunking rigs or snatching a catnap. Some 10 miles or so prior to Capt. Ken's final location he called down from the tower to his crew to set out the trolling spread.

At first, the bunches of weeds was an encouraging sign – perhaps we'd get some dolphin (mahi) to hit and take the skunk off. But it was soon evident that the mats of weeds were everywhere, thick as greenhead flies on Assateague and just as irksome. In short order the crew told the captain, in plain words no less, they'd had enough of landscaping and that it was time to set up the chunk.

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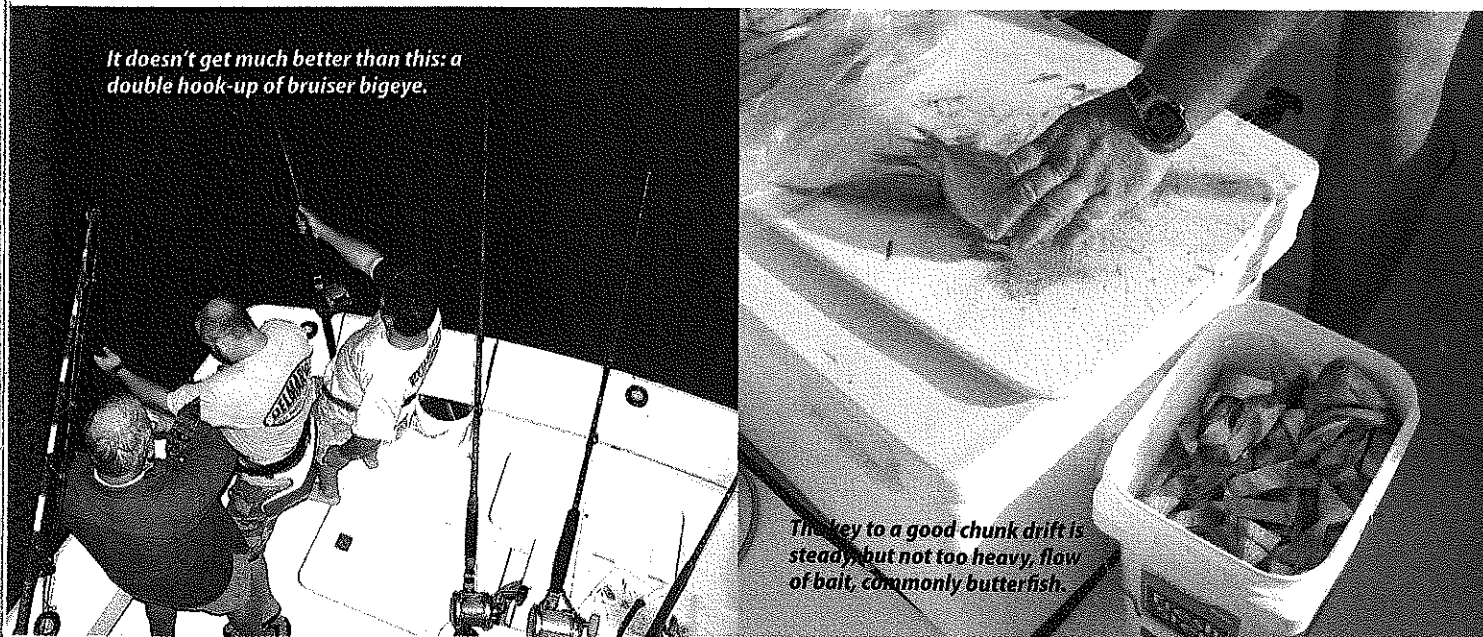


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It doesn't get much better than this: a double hook-up of bruiser bigeye.



The key to a good chunk drift is steady, but not too heavy, flow of bait, commonly butterfish.

## THE NIGHT GAME

The sun soon snuffed out below the western sky and a pale moon rose over the glassy Atlantic. A more perfect night to spend away from port could not have been tailor made. The twinkle of running lights belayed scores of other sportfishing boats, carrying many more anglers who had also come out to test their night skills on the inky black ocean.

Our targets that night were yellowfin and swordfish, and the rigs for each were different, of course. The group set out an 80-class Penn International with a leader better than 400 pounds for the sword, using a whole squid for bait. Three 50-class Penns on stand-up rods were rigged with either butterfish or sardines, and a rod rigged with a Shimano butterfly jig (10 ounces) was on standby in the rocket launcher. The Viking 47 had under her hull in the stern underwater lights that would attract squid and, hopefully, big predators.

First order of business was get a good chunk slick working, which consisted of butterfish. We all took turns making bait, but Keith did the heavy lifting. It wasn't until a few minutes after midnight that two rods went tight, as a pair of yellowfin peeled line. Karl, Andy and I were in the cockpit and though one yellowfin quickly shook the hook the other had more suicidal than survival instincts, and not a lick of toughness; basically it swam directly toward the boat lights and right onto the gaff manned by Roscher. The fight might have lasted all of five minutes, but nonetheless a 45-pounder was in the box and the boat was abuzz with excitement.

Another strike wasn't forthcoming, and for a couple of hours the crew entertained themselves by netting squid

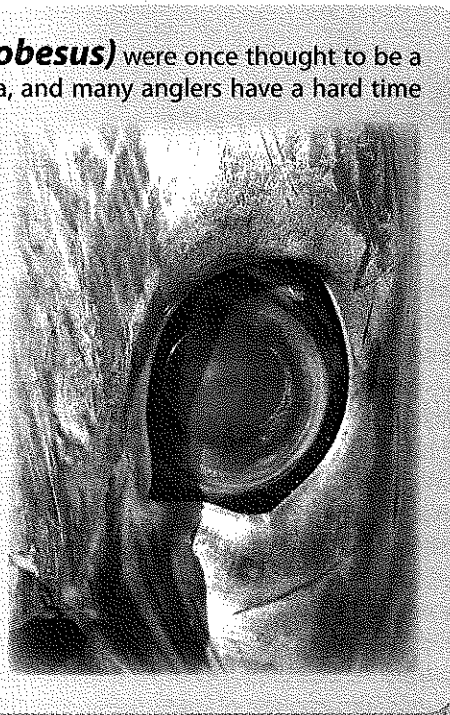
darting in and out of the lights. These rapacious predators were cagey and not at all like scooping bull minnies along the Chesapeake shoreline. But enough were caught to use as live bait.

The crew quieted down to wait out the next assault. Shortly before 2 a.m. the ocean lit up with massive schools of squid, creating a surreal experience that sent a jolt of electricity through us. Everyone on deck recognized the skittish behavior—panic in the ranks as some heretofore unknown marauder(s) was bearing down on the cephalopods. And then the moment we all had been waiting for:

Within 90 seconds three rods went down hard and regardless of decades of blue-water experience in the cockpit, pandemonium erupted. Karl, Tony and Andy had grabbed the rods, and all sunk home the 6/0 Super Mutu circle hooks by Owner. The fight was on, and as predicted, it was more like

## BIGEYE FAST FACTS

**Bigeye (*Thunnus obesus*)** were once thought to be a subspecies of yellowfin tuna, and many anglers have a hard time distinguishing the two since they share very similar physical characteristics. Externally, a bigeye's second dorsal and anal fins don't grow as long as yellowfin, and the golden stripe common to yellowfin is dimmer in the bigeye. Also, the bigeye's pupil is roughly twice the diameter of other tuna (hence the name). Biologists can tell the difference among tuna because the bigeye's liver is striated on the bottom. The world record is 392 pounds and 6 ounces.



a barroom brawl. In just about every fish guide I've read—from Vic Dunaway to A.J. McClane and in John Unkart's recent *Offshore Pursuit*—the bigeye's pugnacious fighting ability is described in the same general manner: rugged and unforgiving.

Within the hour, Tony's fish was yielding but just as Keith was getting into gaff position the sheer weight of the beast snapped the main line. Now it was up to Andy and Karl; a bad back betrayed Andy and for the next 20 minutes that fish was then worked by the remaining crew. Karl, meanwhile, was full on into his fish, perhaps channeling his days as a lineman at Annapolis High School (where we both went to school) to bear down and take the fight to the bigeye.

The bad back syndrome seemed endemic as that one tuna sent folks to the bench. Looking around for a warm body, they called up (cursed is more accurate) to the tower—where I was shooting pictures of the mayhem—for me to join the fray. I had to laugh because it was like a scene from some corny Disney movie where the goofy kid has to strap on skates and score the winning goal.

I've fought a few big tuna before but had never tangled, much less landed a bigeye, but to the crew I was an unknown quantity. Ken made sure I understood his direction, which I had no choice since he was at times a mere two inches from my ear. Gotta love a captain who takes charge of the cockpit.

Despite joining the battle late, I was fired up to have a shot at landing a bigeye, which I'd never caught before, and I learned later much to my amazement, neither had anyone on the boat.

After some gear issues—the first belt they gave me should be retired immediately as it was worse than useless—I settled in for a standoff. The two fish crossed lines on several occasions and each time Ken, Karl and Keith deftly worked to undo the mess.

Hour two of the fight brought the last chance at success: one final untangling and Karl was free to put the hurt on the tuna while

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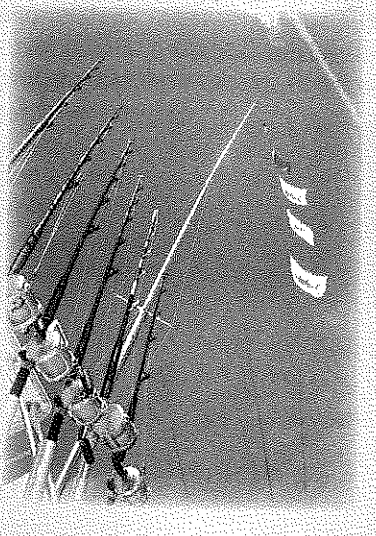
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I was sent to a corner and gently instructed "don't let that fish swim across the transom!"

I didn't and Keith, Tony and Ken all gaffed Karl's tuna and when it was brought into the boat amid guttural expulsions not heard since the construction of the pyramids, everyone erupted in hoots of joyous victory and awe at the size of the beast.

Now to the business of landing my tuna: surprisingly, it was more or less out of juice and, using deliberate pulls timed with steady cranks, it came to gaff within 10 minutes. Two out of three bigeye tuna, more than a decent success ratio in my book, and while it wasn't the cleanest fight (since when do bigeye fight fair?), I'll partially scratch that tuna off my catch list until the next time the bell rings. We learned later that while some boats struggled, others had a banner night, scoring double digit yellowfin and enough swords to make the trip well worth it.

## SUNRISE SURPRISE

While recounting the nearly two-hour battle and guessing the aggregate and individual weight of the tuna, an early morning appearance of Mr. White again cranked the gang into high gear just as the sun bloomed behind billowy clouds. It's amazing what a shot of adrenaline can do to retard the urge to sleep.

A ballyhoo was dropped back to the fish, which smacked it once or twice in classic marlin fashion and then inhaled it. Somehow Capt. Karl was again on the lead rod, and working with Tony and Keith, Capt. Ken displayed textbook boat handling skills to land the 65-pound class white within 20 minutes. After a few quick pictures, it was set back in the water, where it snapped its crescent-shaped tail and shot down into the depths. And while the lingering memory of that lost bigeye gnawed slightly at the crew, most especially Capt. Ken, we were satiated by the victories earned, laughs shared and the promise of fresh ahi. 🐟