

**SCHOOL'S OUT:** School bluefin provide great sport whether you choose to troll or jig for them.



# tuneafish

Two pros share their bluefin strategies on Stellwagen Bank.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY GLENN LAW



**BANK ON IT:** The coast of Massachusetts offers many great jumping-off points for accessing Stellwagen Bank, one of the region's prime bluefin tuna grounds. As the story illustrates, there are several different and effective strategies for finding and catching the fish. By mastering all of them, you'll maximize your chances of finding and catching fish on a given day.

## The *Karen Lynn* loped along,

trolling over Stellwagen Bank, in Massachusetts. It had been a slow morning. The young James Andrew, about out of patience, stepped to the rod pulling a 10-inch Hoky across the light chop and jigged, reeled, jigged, reeled. Wham! He had the magic touch, and when his bluefin tuna came in over the transom, the skunk was off the boat.

The next one came as the same lure was zipping over the surface as James' father, Jim, retrieved it to change baits. There are days when you wonder why so many pains are taken to do things just so, since the fish come at the dumbest times. But the appearance of these bluefin tuna in the spring has proven reliable, as they stop to feed on the abundant bait that gathers over Stellwagen Bank.

The *Karen Lynn*, a Lowell 43, is a solid, roomy Down East-style lobster boat converted to a tuna boat, says her skipper, Capt. Collin MacKenzie of Essex, Massachusetts. We pulled out of Gloucester at dawn and chugged, all 18 knots worth of chugging, to the northwest corner of Stellwagen, then to the Double L's, where we tagged the first 50-pounder of the day.





**ON THE LEADER:** Using heavy leader material allows you to better control the fish at boat-side when gaffing or releasing.



**FIRST LIGHT HAS SPECIALIZED IN FLY-FISHING** for bluefin tuna. Spingler says often the most difficult bluefins are the big ones feeding on small baits. The advantage to flies is you can mimic these small baitfish. However, the past couple of years have seen the year class of fish that returns a bit too robust for fly rods.

"We have not done a lot since the fish have gotten so big," says Spingler. "But when we fly-fish, we use 14-weight Sage and Winston rods, Tibor Gulfstream or Pacific reels, and at least 20-pound tippet, and usually 30-pound. We load the reels with 65- or 80-pound test gelspun backing."

Meanwhile, on a companion boat with which MacKenzie often works, Capt. Derek Spingler of *First Light* Anglers was scouring the bank in a 24-foot Silverhawk, a fast twin-outboard, on a report of fish to the south. Interestingly, that morning Spingler drew a blank, while the *Karen Lynn* chugged comfortably from fish to fish. On another day, however, moving around could well be the winning strategy.

Both *First Light's* and *Karen Lynn's* captain have well-earned reputations for putting fish in the cockpit, though their strategies and tactics are vastly different. There's something to be learned from each of them.

## Float Like a Butterfly

**SPINGLER IS STRAIGHTFORWARD** about his proactive approach to fishing the roughly 850 square miles of Stellwagen Bank. "I will not spend more than 30 minutes in one area," he says. "If nothing is happening, I move. You need to find the bait and whales, even if you have to run to Provincetown or north off Gloucester."

Spingler's plan includes traveling far and finding the fish, which means locating the predominant bait, sand eels, or if those aren't around, the mackerel or halfbeaks that make up the bluefin diet this time of the year. "We move around on the bank and look for the sand eels, which we find by locating the whales — the humpbacks, minke whales and finbacks," he says. "The humps key in on the sand eels. And we watch for birds: shearwaters, terns and gannets — those are the indicators."

## Bluefins on the Fly

Typically they use RIO Leviathan lines, which feature a 600-grain shooting head and a 70-pound-test core. "Some people fish intermediate and floating lines, but they are so thick they are not aerodynamic," he says. "With the shooting head, you can roll-cast a 3-inch bunker or 10-inch mackerel fly effectively."

## PRO TIP: “Drifting to the tuna is effective when fishing a popper. It’s quieter, as the boat isn’t slapping, and you let them come to you.”

— CAPT. DEREK SPINGLER



Once he finds bait, Spingler brings the fish finder into play to pinpoint the tuna. “We drive around the sand eels until we mark fish, which may be 50 or 60 feet down mopping up the stunned and crippled sand eels the whales have been feeding on,” he says. “Then we go to work on them with spinning tackle.”

Ninety percent of the time, the tuna and the bait will be moving into the wind, which is an ideal setup for drifting down on them. “Drifting to the tuna is effective when fishing a popper,” he says. “It’s quieter, as the boat isn’t slapping, and you let them come to you.”

Despite the basic run-and-gun strategy, Spingler says it’s critical to lie low once you locate fish. Running through them breaks up the bait and puts the tuna on alert. “Let the fish come to you,” he advises. “Stop the boat and watch. Pay attention to how they are acting; see what their personality is that day.”

Spingler prefers spinning tackle in this situation. “We are fishing at the upper limits of spinning tackle,” he says.

“Braided lines — Jerry Brown Line One, PowerPro, Momoi Diamond Braid — have revolutionized what we do. You can’t cast 80-pound mono with a spinning rod, but with braid, we can load the reel with 80-pound and cast with it.”

### Lots of Drag

**BUT 80-POUND-TEST PUTS HEAVY DEMANDS** on spinning tackle. “We use Shimano Stellas, usually set with 20 to 25 pounds of drag,” he says. “Even the Saragosas are phenomenal. They hold up with 15 to 20 pounds of drag.”

Spingler favors 7-foot rods, in his case custom 30- to 80-pound-class models built on Calstar graphite blanks.

Big tackle and maximum drags dictate stand-up-style fishing for bluefin.

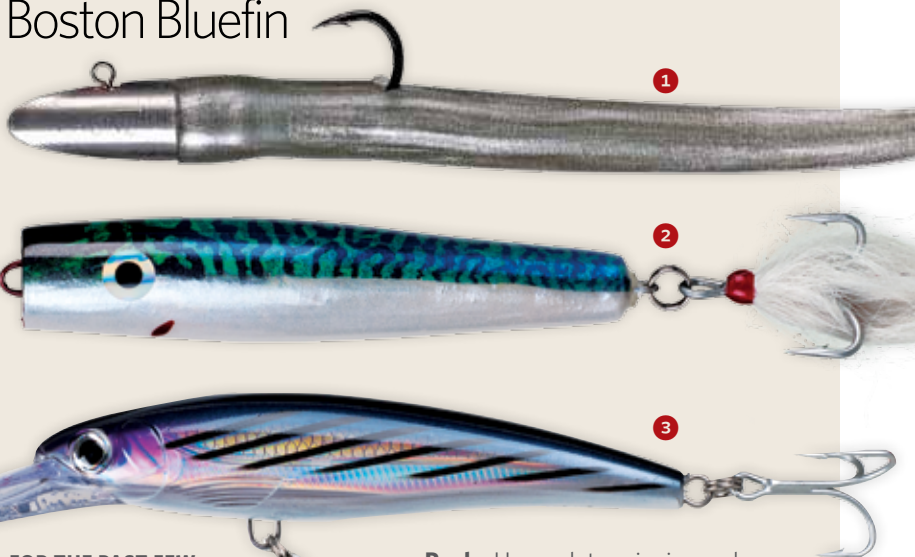
“We fight them out of a harness,” says Spingler. The setup is a standard harness and belt, with the addition of a spinning-rod adapter, a strap that wraps around the rod above the reel seat and provides lugs for the harness. Adapters are available from Braid and AFTCO, among others.

With this setup, Spingler says, “We typically have a rod rigged with a 2½- to 3½-ounce popper, to push some water. We use a lot of custom lures, as well as Yo-Zuri Hydro poppers and Ocean Lure poppers, from a company in Newburyport.”

Spingler pays particular attention to the hooks on his lures and, in most cases, swaps out the stock hooks with 4X replacements and steps up any swivels to 120- to 150-pound-

#### ■ SWS PLANNER

### Boston Bluefin



#### FOR THE PAST FEW

**YEARS,** the bluefins returning to Stellwagen to feed have been the 2004 year class of fish. Anglers have watched them grow from the 25- to 50-pound range, and they get bigger every year. This year the fish are expected to be 73 to 80 inches, which puts them between 250 and 300 pounds. Prepare accordingly. And as Capt. Collin MacKenzie recommends, “When you think you are ready, get ready some more.”

**Rods:** 50- to 80-pound conventional stand-up; 40- to 80-pound-class spinning rods.

**Reels:** Heavy duty spinning reels with exceptional drag durability and high line capacity; 50- and 80-pound-class conventional trolling reels.

**Lines:** Spinning, 80-pound braid; trolling, 130-pound hollow-core Spectra backing with 150 yards of 130-pound mono top shot.

**Lures and baits:** RonZ **1**, Hogy or Slug-Go plastics; Ocean Lures, **2** Yo-Zuri mackerel poppers; Rapala X-RAP Magnum **3** and Mann’s diving plugs; chuggers; rigged mackerel, menhaden and ballyhoo for trolling.

**Other:** Use Braid or AFTCO stand-up strap adapter with harness for spinning tackle.



**PRO TIP:** “The northwest corner of Stellwagen is the nice steep drop-off where the bait tends to collect. If you have an autopilot, it is great to set up on the drop-off, add a couple of marks and continue to troll the edge.”

— CAPT. COLLIN MACKENZIE

class. Another favored setup is a flutter-style jig, a 224-gram 6- to 8-inch vertical jig. “When we are marking fish deep on the sonar,” says Spingler, “I have my anglers open the bail and drop the jig and count until it hits the bottom. Then they can gauge their drop to put the jig in front of the fish.”

## Soft-plastics Work

**THE 7½- TO 9-INCH SLUG-GO OR HOGY SOFT-PLASTIC** lures rigged with a jig head are especially effective. RonZ lead-heads, built with tuna-strength hooks attached with a swivel, have become the fast favorite on these grounds. The swivel between the hook and the head prevents the tuna from gaining leverage against the hook and coming unfastened.

“We’ve also done well trolling unweighted Slug-Go-type lures, especially when the fish are crashing or are hitting more sporadically, or when I am marking them on the fish finder but not seeing them on the surface,” says Spingler.

## Built for Comfort

**ON THE KAREN LYNN**, Collin MacKenzie takes a different approach to fishing Stellwagen. “Out on the bank it is a matter of searching until you find the bait and the fish,” he says. “The advantage of trolling like we do is you cover a lot of ground and study what is going on throughout the day, and you have time to stick in one area rather than constantly thinking in the back of your

### ■ SWS PLANNER

## Boston Bluefin

**THIS YEAR THE FISH RETURNING TO FEED** on Stellwagen Bank are expected to be over 73 inches, which makes them saleable. As there is a vibrant global market for bluefin tuna, the line between commercial and recreational fishing often blurs when the tuna get big enough to sell. Special regulations apply, and rules governing each fishing season, which begins June 1, are published in May. For current information, go to [hmspermits.noaa.gov](http://hmspermits.noaa.gov).

**What:** Bluefin tuna.

**When:** June.

**Where:** Stellwagen Bank, out of Boston and Gloucester.

**Who:** Capt. Derek Spingler and partner Nat Moody of *First Light Anglers* are pioneers in light-tackle tuna fishing. From their nimble 26-foot center console, their run-and-gun tactics have revolutionized the sport on Stellwagen. They work in close cooperation with Capt. Collin MacKenzie of *Karen Lynn Charters*, whose traditional Down East-style boat puts just as many tuna in the cockpit.

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mind that you can go 20 miles to the next spot. So you work an area thoroughly and let the fish come to you.”

Part of finding the area that holds promise is locating the whales or, in lieu of that, finding attractive bottom. For MacKenzie, the fish finder is the first tool of choice in picking a fishing spot. “The fish will eventually show up,” he says. “That’s the thing with tuna around here. Everything can change in five minutes. It can be a dead zone, and before you know it, it’s erupting.”

When he finds whales and birds, even when they are not active, he hangs with them. “When the birds are sitting down and the whales are hanging out breathing, they are there for a reason,” he says. “I am going to troll around the whales until something happens.”

As tidal current moves in and out, the best time is an hour before slack tide and an hour after. That’s when you want to be in position and on your game. “The



DAVE MOREL

**LURES OR BAITS:** Bluefin can be caught on lures, jigs or trolled baits, giving anglers many options for tackle.

northwest corner of Stellwagen is the nice steep drop-off where the bait tends to collect,” he says. MacKenzie puts his fish finder on basic split-screen 50 and 200 kHz and follows an edge. “If you have an autopilot, it is great to set up on the drop-off, add a couple of marks and continue to troll the edge.”

## On the Troll

**WHEN TROLLING, BOTH DEEP-DIVING PLUGS AND SOFT-PLASTICS** pay off, and MacKenzie uses, for the most part, the same selection of lures that have proven so successful for Spingler. But because MacKenzie is trolling so much of the time, natural and live baits play a big part in his strategy too.

“We’ll pull a Rapala deep-diver — the big X-Rap — or a ballyhoo,” says MacKenzie. He recommends varying the color of the diving plugs. Gold Green Mackerel is a good starting point, but there are days when the least likely color pays off and



**SPIN OR TROLL:** You can opt for heavy trolling tackle like this, or you can use some of the new spinning gear designed for braid.

nothing else will. He trolls at 3½ knots. Rigged ballyhoo, with a chin weight when it is choppy and without when conditions are calm, are standard fare. Mackerel also produce well when they are available.

“There are a few live-bait suppliers to buy from,” says MacKenzie, “but for the most part you have to acquire them yourself. For mackerel, seek out the inshore rock structures they tend to gather on, and get them with sabikis.” Mackerel show up in mid-June, while the pogies (menhaden) follow later in the summer.

The big, wide cockpit on the *Karen Lynn* is well-suited to trolling. MacKenzie pulls four lines and deploys both 50- and 80-pound conventional stand-up gear. He loads reels with 130-pound hollow-core Spectra and adds 150 yards of 130-pound mono top shot.

“People neglect to bump up the size of their gear to match the fish,” he says. “But you need to commit to a short fight. Get right over the fish. Get them straight below you and break their spirit. Long fights always end in heartache.” It’s equally important to prepare the gear so it’s in 100 percent shape. “These fish have shown up here to feed. When you find them, they are going to be aggressive. Make sure you are prepared. Double-check your gear. Then when you think you are ready, get ready some more.” ~