

Bonito Bonanza - Inshore Tuna Time

By: Capt. David Bacon

Listen... anytime you have a wide-open bite, lasting a month and a half, on 10 to 15 pound bruiser bonito, you've got hot fishing action. Get out your bonito gear because it is that time of year again and bonito are busting loose.

Any SoCal saltwater angler, eligible for AARP, can probably remember the glory days of summertime bonito fishing in the SoCal Bight. We called them "half-day tuna", "boneheads", "boneys" and a great many other fond nicknames. Mostly we called them FUN, as we honed our light-tackle fish-fighting skills using light-action rods and freshwater spinning reels.

Big bonito like we've been catching the past few summers will stress-test even tough gear such as a medium-action Fenwick Inshore rod and a Penn International 965 reel spooled with 20 pound Berkley Big Game line. Normal size bonito, in the 4 to 8 pound range are a blast on a light-action Fenwick Inshore rod and Abu Garcia Cardinal C806 spinner spooled with Berkley Vanish line. Another good option is the new jig-stick model blank from Tady, custom-wrapped and matched to an Avet reel.

These fish are fast and move great distances quickly, yet there are certain areas where good action tends to focus. Big schools of bonito are active at most of our SoCal islands, with Catalina, San Clemente, Anacapa and Santa Cruz islands topping the list of hotspots. Fortunately for us all, they have also been schooling up and feeding aggressively along the mainland coast above San Diego, off of Dana Point, at the Horseshoe, in Santa Monica Bay and off of Santa Barbara. These speedsters can be lightyears away in the blink of an eye, so keep an eye out for bonito signs wherever you fish.

Birds are the best signs to watch for. Take advantage of their ability to see or sense action at amazing distances. They will point the way. As bonito drive baitballs to the surface and feed savagely, sea birds show you the way as they gather up and dive on the surface bait. The scene is classic... terrified baitfish skittering across topwater, bonito crashing wildly on the frothing surface, while seabirds wheel and dive on the hapless baitfish. Bad day to be a baitfish! When the action is over the birds will sit on the water and watch and wait. The presence of dozens of birds on the water indicates bonito in the vicinity.

Bonito are not always spotted crashing on surface bait. Often times they forage widely scattered and cruising several feet below the surface. Signs of their presence can include scattered upwellings of baitballs and birds spread out actively searching for spots of activity where a baitball is driven to the surface by hungry bonito. The birds impatiently await surface activity because they know the boneheads are there.

Once you've found the bite, there are tried and true ways to get in on the action. One way is to slide a boat up to the feeding activity and cast jigs or lures. Some of my favorites include Luhr Jensen Krocodies and Deep Stingers, Tady A1, Braid jigs even plastic baits like Berkley Powerbait Swimming Mullet. Hookups often come fast and furious.

Chumming live baitfish helps to keep a school of bonito near the boat. Then cast livelined baits among the chum to connect with a fighting bonehead. A live bait fish looks like a quick and easy meal to the hungry fish.

Another way to get into the action is to troll feathers, spoons or jigs through the surface action. Try not to troll right through the middle of the action for fear of disrupting the feeding frenzy. Instead, troll past on one side, then turn across the area so the lures go right through the action. You can almost call a hookup as it is about to happen -- like an eight ball in the corner pocket – as your lures swim enticingly through the action.

We used to carry dozens of “bonito feathers” aboard most boats. Too bad they are difficult to find these days. They are rather simple and effective little trolling feathers... just a shiny metal head/hook, with a small feather in a variety of colors. They weren't fancy, but then a hungry bonito doesn't require fancy. If it moves and can be caught, it looks like dinner to a bonehead.

One last word of advice for after the fishing action. When you get back home, remember how hard your rods and reels have worked. Don't run them hard and put them up wet. Back off the drags, lube the reels and wash the rods with Dawn dishwashing soap, rinse everything off with fresh water and then dry it all with a soft towel. You'll soon have an itch to go hook into more wild-eyed bonito and you'll be very glad you took such good care of your gear.

Now that your gear is properly cared for, it is time to eat. Bonito are good, as long as they are bled immediately after being caught and then kept cold in a fish box or kill bag. Never put a bonito in a gunny sack in the sun. The lateral line on a bonito is dark red oxygen rich meat with a strong flavor many folks don't appreciate. This V-shaped section can easily be cut out of the fillet. The meat above and below the dark meat is tender and flaky. They bar-b-que up very nicely. They also smoke up well enough to make you smack your lips.