

BONITA!

By Capt. Thom Pelletier



There's a tuna-shaped projectile doing his best to relieve me of all of the line spooled on my weary reel. "Bonita!" my partner yells. This proclamation, however, can mean different things to different people besides being scientifically incorrect. Is it an Atlantic Bonito? A Little Tunny? Maybe even an oddball Mackerel?

We are fortunate, perhaps more than we realize at times, here on the southern New England coast. We are blessed with a diversity of target species available to us throughout the season. Those familiar with any of my contributions within the pages of *On The Water* in the past are aware of the fact that I like to work the bottom.

That's not to say, however, that I won't take advantage of the bounty of piscatorial participants that present themselves here on Rhodes Island's south shores. When Bass make their presence known or a pack of Bluefish throws themselves at me, I'm more than happy to engage in as many tugs of war with these guys as they care to present. Fact is, though; I rarely set out on any given day to target anything not affiliated with the sinker bouncer fellowship.

This mind set changes dramatically, however, from late August until sometime in October. The later season visitor that changes my priorities completely is the bantam kin of the mighty Bluefin and Yellowfin Tunas that many anglers travel untold miles to tangle with. I'm talking about the False Albacore or Little Tunny and they are as tough and obstinate as any light tackle angler could ask for.

The extent of the invasion of these ultra challenging gamesters varies from year to year. Last year for example, I didn't run into nearly as many schools as previous years. On the brighter side, almost every fish was in double digits. They frequently travel with schools of Atlantic Bonito and are often mistakenly referred to by the same name. The term "Bonita", in fact, has become a blanket appellation for several types of mini-tunas.

Bonito and False Albacore are two distinct species distinguishing themselves in several ways both in appearance and characteristically. The Atlantic Bonito (*Sarda sarda*) has a long low dorsal fin, horizontal, almost diagonal stripes along its side and very prominent teeth. By looking at the two fish you can see a basic difference in how they pursue their prey. The Albie or Tunny (*Euthynnus alletteratus*) has a large mouth with its teeth recessed, and is a gulping feeder. Albies can be distinguished by its high dorsal fin, squiggly lines on its back and black spots near its pectoral fin. They don't exhibit the extrusive teeth of the Bonito who grasp their prey.

While often confused with Bonito, False Albacore are not likely to be confused with the True or Longfin Albacore. Other

than both being of the tuna clan, they have little in common. The Longfin (*Thunnus alalunga*) is a much larger open ocean roaming creature that's not probable anywhere within sight of land. They sport long pectoral fins (hence the name), a dark blue back with gray sides and are just about as tasty as any Tuna you could eat. False Albie meat by contrast, is snubbed by even the family house cat.

Back to the Bonies and Albies. Both species usually hesitate for a split second on the strike before they blast off. Both also head out in a hurry on blistering first runs but while the Bonito will doggedly scoot from side to side as you grudgingly gain back line, the Albies will often run right back at you. If you aren't using a fast retrieve reel, and, in fact, even if you are, you're going to be cranking the crank as fast you can and still won't likely be able to keep up. This is where most fish are lost, as the lack of tension on the hook will sometimes allow it to slip out. Sharp hooks with pronounced barbs will lessen this occurrence, leave the barbless gear at home. Another lesson I've learned in dealing with and bettering the odds with these critters is to change the direction of the rod pressure. Alternating pressure from side to side and then vertically seems to confuse them and slow them down a bit.

Okay so now we've discussed False Albacore and Atlantic Bonito and eased the confusion somewhat, right? Not exactly as some seasons a fish that looks very much like an Albie drops in on us. I've even heard confused anglers mention the fact that the Albies were "running awfully small" this season. That's because they're not Albies, they're Frigate Mackerel, sometimes called Frigate Tuna and averaging two to three pounds. Although they are more likely to stay further offshore, they do now and then

venture inside. These guys may be observed along rocky shores and over patch reefs as well as in offshore waters.

Frigates (*Auxis thazard brachydorax*) look more like a tuna than a mackerel. Ken Schultz's Fishing Encyclopedia says that these fish are found throughout warm waters but all Mackerels are pelagic schooling fish, and are also found worldwide in tropical and subtropical seas.

Back in the 1970's it was customary to pursue giant Bluefin Tuna within sight of the beaches from the Nebraska Shoals area over east to Scarborough Beach along with the area known as "the middle" between Pt. Judith and Block Island. (to page 42)



Atlantic Bonito



False Albacore



Member Ben Pickering displays his 7.3 lb. bonito that won the RISAA 2007 Yearlong Tournament - Junior/Shore Division. It was Ben's first bonito