WESTERN OUTDOOR NEWS

Section 2

San Diego Offshore Jackpot set for 7th annual running out of Point Loma

THE WINNING FISH IN 2020 was a 126-pound bluefin caught by Frank Illingworth aboard the *Tomahawk*. Captain Joe Cresci (right) was at the helm that day. PAUL LEBOWITZ PHOTO

Cash and prize-laden event a competition between sportboat anglers as well as the vessels and landings

BY MIKE STEVENS
WON Staff Writer

POINT LOMA – The San Diego Offshore Jackpot (SDOJ) will be unleashed on the Scott Street sportfishing landings in Point Loma on June 24-25. It marks the 7th annual running of *WON's* unique event that's as much of a competition between anglers as it is between the boats, crews and landings. Anglers are fishing for combined jackpot cash from six boats and huge sponsor prizes, while the landings are after the perpetual trophy (currently residing at Fisherman's Landing after the *Tomahawk's* victory in 2020) and waterfront bragging rights.

Participants will embark on an overnight trip on one of at least six boats out of either H&M Landing, Point Loma Sportfishing or Fisherman's Landing and gun for the largest qualifying fish and a shot at a huge "combined jackpot" with cash going to the top three finishers.

The SDOJ is rooted in *WON's* long-running success in its diverse charter schedule, which led to similar boat vs. boat, combined jackpot events like the Rockfish Rumble, Channel Islands Shootout and Central Coast Lingcod Championship. These are all products of *WON's* mission to bring the competitive, tournament atmosphere to sportboat anglers. As the saltwater sportfishing capital of the world, San Diego playing host to such an event featuring that number of top-notch boats to go along with overwhelming sponsor support was a necessity.

A $300 ticket puts an angler on the *New Lo-An, Tomahawk, Condor, T-Bird, Excalibur* or *Daiwa Pacific* with $20 of that going toward the overall jackpot. Point Loma Sportfishing's *New Lo-An* as well as the *Tomahawk* out of Fisherman's Landing have already sold out, and vessels historically fill up quickly as the offshore fishing reports further trend in the right direction. So if you want to get on a specific boat, registering sooner than later is the way to go.

Based on six full boats, the combined-jackpot payouts for

SD OFFSHORE JACKPOT/next

Incredible year for bluefin tuna – A retrospective for 2020

BY LARRY BROWN
Special to Western Outdoor News

Part 1 of a 3-part series

With major contributions by Owyn Snodgrass — NOAA Fisheries Biologist, Theresa Labriola — Wild Oceans BFT Conservation Advocate and Tim Ekstrom, co-owner and Captain of Royal Star

Author's note: A couple months back, I called Editor Blake Warren at *Western Outdoor News* and brought up the idea that Pacific bluefin tuna may be spawning more locally in the Eastern Pacific as the numbers are so abundant, there are multiple-year classes of fish, and the populations have been building every year. Neither of us came up with a definitive answer but he thought it was a great question and he asked me to write an article for *WON*. So I reached out to two scientists at NOAA and Wild Oceans, respectively, who specialize in the Pacific bluefin tuna, along with Captain Tim Ekstrom, whose *Royal Star* is out every day during the season catching these fish.

My perspective is that of a recreational angler and charter master. I'll go first.

LARRY BROWN, CHARTER MASTER AND RECREATIONAL ANGLER

Anglers on every one of my nine long range charters in 2020 were treated to oceanic scenes worthy of any National Geographic documentary. Massive schools of bluefin tuna for miles and miles exploding on huge schools of baitfish were common place. Watching these mega schools of bluefin rampaging on the surface obliterating shoals of tiny bait was knee buckling. It's actually hard to describe — words are insufficient. Being there, witnessing the abundance in person, seeing the acres and acres of solid fish in all year classes from 20-pound 2-year-olds to 300-pound 8-year-olds, balling up baits, boiling everywhere and violently crashing on kite baits and eating a well selected, well fished sardine at the end of your line is the only way to truly understand the magnificence of 2020. The bluefin tuna were so abundant that the Mexican seiner fleet landed their entire annual quota in 10 days of fishing in early January, and according to most long range captains, they didn't even put a small dent in the biomass of fish.

What we saw was not always what we got. Excitement and adrenaline were frequently followed by disbelief and despair as these 100-ton schools of bluefin just drifted away and ignored all of our baits in which we craftily tried to hide our hooks. We generally were rewarded with a school that stuck with us and slowly began to pick at our baits. Limits were generally achieved for the most prepared and skilled anglers but the fish were still picky to the extreme, and anglers who didn't make the adjustments often failed to hook a fish. The fish became progressively more bold and cooperative as the summer and fall seasons unfolded.

I have been fishing on long range boats for 25 years, generally taking 7 to 10 trips every year. The volume and quality of bluefin tuna we experienced in 2020 was so far above any historical perspective, and that includes the epic, banner years of 2018 and 2019 when we said it couldn't get any better.

JUMBO 300-POUND-CLASS BLUEFIN taking flight near Santa Barbara Island.

Getting on the right school was the key — so was selecting a perfect bait, using a small number 2 size J–hook and a short topshot of the highest quality light fluorocarbon, usually 25- or 30-pound test.

Reading the signs was also critical. Were they boiling in the chum or far away from the boat? That would determine if you butt hooked your sardine and disciplined yourself to change baits every 30 seconds if you didn't have a screamer. Or if you determined if you were going to have the patience of Job to get your perfect bait into the 100-yard zone and working the bait back and forth through that 100-yard zone until you got bit. Getting a perfect hook-set and using the correct drag setting were also critical to success, especially with the light gear, light line and small hooks. Failure to execute perfectly frequently resulted in failure to land the fish. Dreams vs. nightmares.

Two scientists have dedicated the better part of their careers to studying and understanding the Pacific bluefin tuna and the ocean in which they live and across which some of them migrate. I asked Owyn Snodgrass and Theresa Labriola to share their thoughts about the building bluefin phenomenon in our Eastern Pacific, focusing on the science side of the equation. Owyn is a Fisheries Biologist with NOAA and Theresa is the Bluefin Tuna Conservation Advocate with Wild Oceans.

Let's start with a Q&A with NOAA's Owyn Snodgrass. I developed a bunch of questions from anglers, captains and crew members from my long range trips. Here are Owyn Snodgrass's answers to my questions.

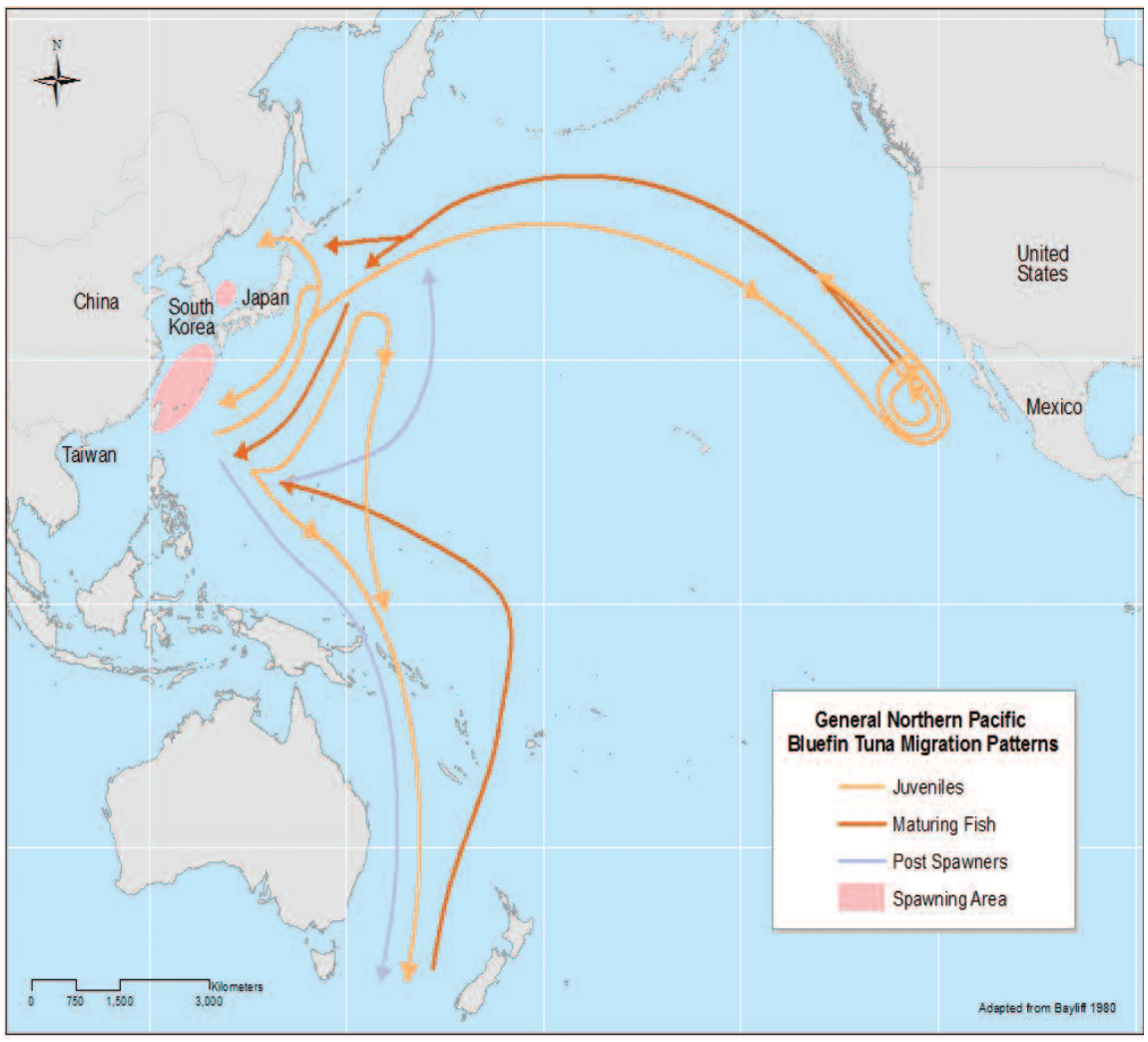
ANSWERS BY OWYN SNODGRASS, NOAA FISHERIES BIOLOGIST

Q: Where does the Pacific bluefin tuna spawn? What is the evidence? Could there be a spawning ground closer to Baja California and Southern California?

A: *Spawning of Pacific bluefin tuna (PBFT, Thunnus orientalis) has only been documented in the Western Pacific Ocean (WPO). In the WPO there are two documented spawning grounds, one in the*

BLUEFIN TUNA/39

DENNIS WHITE AND STEVE EGGERT hold up a trophy bluefin.



MIGRATION MAP of bluefin tuna movement in the Pacific Ocean.

Bluefin tuna...

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Sea of Japan, and the other in the East China Sea. This is based on the presence of large, mature adult PBFT, and the subsequent capture of PBFT eggs, larvae and juveniles shortly thereafter. To date, no evidence of PBFT spawning in the California Current has been documented. Surveys of fish eggs and larvae in the Eastern Pacific Ocean are conducted annually (since 1949, California Cooperative Oceanic Fisheries Investigations) and have never found PBFT eggs or larvae. To further evaluate whether the large PBFT have been spawning in the EPO in recent years (2014-2020), NOAA's Southwest Fisheries Science Center collected gonads (the reproductive organs, aka the ovaries and testes) from PBFT up to 350 pounds. Although many tuna are mature by this size, the gonads collected from PBFT brought into to San Diego landings did not show any evidence of PBFT spawning.

Q: How far is their migration?

A: *PBFT that migrate into the EPO travel across the entire Pacific Ocean from the WPO, which is about a 5,000-mile journey one way (See figure above).*

Q: When (what age) do they begin their migration? How big are they?

A: *The majority of PBFT that migrate to the EPO are 1 to 3 years old, or 7 to 30 pounds. There is no evidence that fish migrate at larger sizes although there has been limited tagging of larger fish in the WPO, which could help answer this question.*

Q: When (what age) do the adults return home to spawn? How big are they?

A: *Historically PBFT are thought to spend between 2 to 5 years in the EPO feeding in the productive waters of the California Current. The amount of time PBFT spend in the EPO likely relates to environmental variables such as available prey, and larger scale differences in the oceanographic conditions such as El Niño and La Niña events. But we still know very little about what triggers them to return to the WPO.*

Q: What is the earliest they become sexually mature?

A: *That really depends on each individual fish. In other words, fish don't necessarily mature at the same time. Maturity in fish is determined by the presence of enlarged gonads that have eggs (oocytes) for females, and presence of milt (sperm) in males. Studies in the Sea of Japan have determined that 50% of PBFT mature by 5*

BLUEFIN TUNA/next

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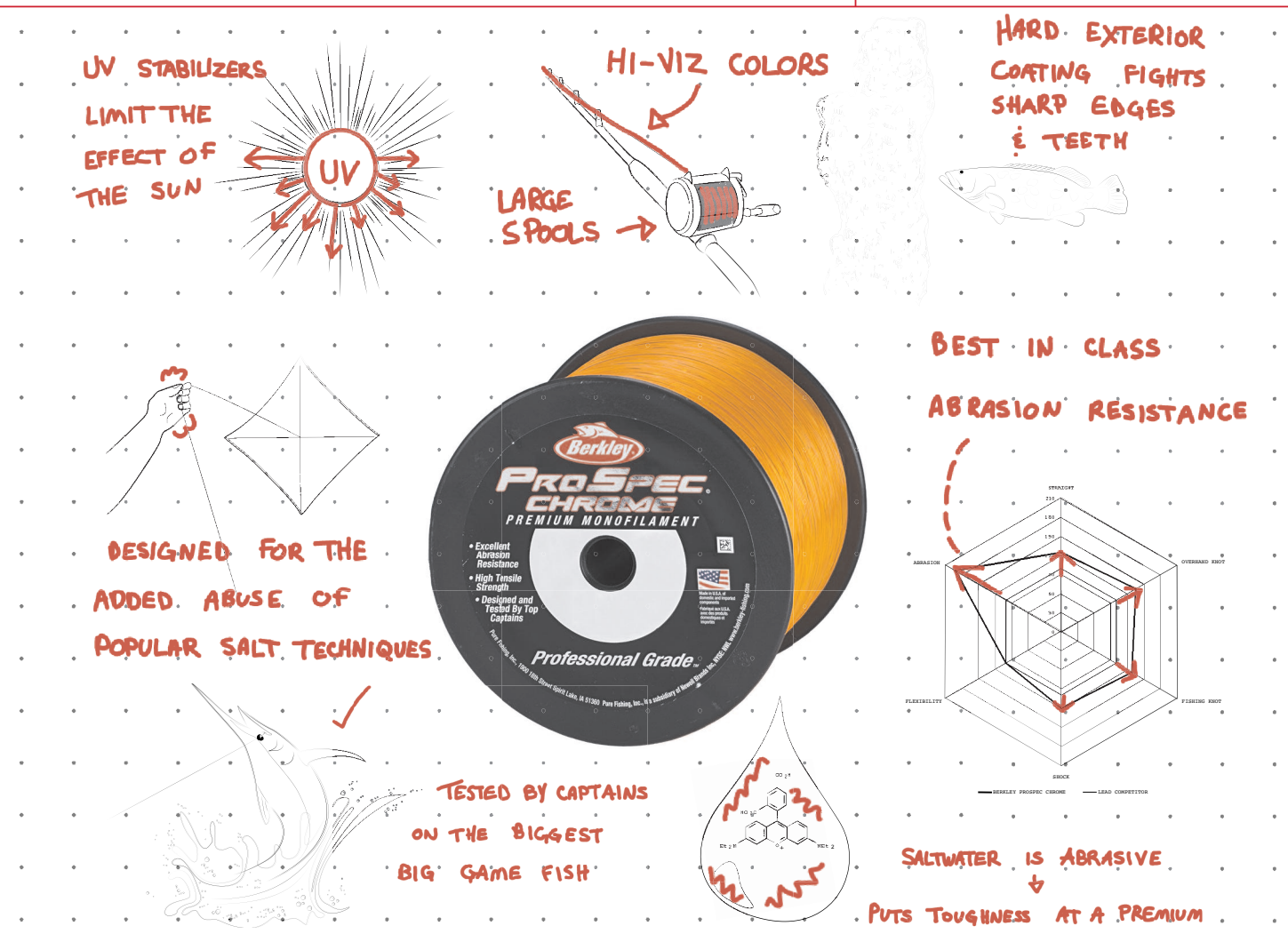

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THIS 198-POUND BLUEFIN WAS caught on an NOAA survey off Central California in 2014.

Bluefin tuna...

Continued from previous page

years of age, or around 150 pounds.

Q: How long does it take for them to swim across the Pacific, as juveniles swimming east and as adults swimming west?

A: *It is estimated that juveniles make the transoceanic migration from the Western Pacific Ocean (WPO) to the Eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) in 1.5 to 2 months. The time it takes for fish to swim back to the WPO from the EPO is currently being studied by several organizations.*

Q: What is their approximate routing in each direction?

A: *While the exact migration route likely varies a bit from year to year, the figure shown here shows the general paths they follow when traversing the Pacific Ocean. Note that an unknown percentage of PBFT makes migrations into the Southern Pacific Ocean.*

Q: How long do they stay in the Eastern Pacific along the California and Baja coasts?

A: *Historically it was thought that PBFT resided in the EPO for a period of 2 to 5 years after migration from the WPO. In recent years that trend seems to have changed with PBFT apparently remaining in the EPO for longer than previously thought. Fish up to 10 years of age are being caught in the EPO. These older fish probably arrived in the EPO when they were 1 to 3 years old, suggesting they have spent the last 6 to 9 years in the California Current. This increase in residency is likely due to a combination of factors such as favorable water conditions and prey availability.*

Q: What do bluefin eat in residence and along their migration?

A: *Little is known about what they eat during their rapid migration across the Pacific. In general, tagging data suggests they are constantly on the move and don't stop to forage at any one place along their journey for very long. While residing in the California Current, or EPO, they are known to forage on a diverse assemblage of fishes, squids and crustaceans. Like many other tunas, PBFT appear to be forage on whatever is available and most abundant. During the strong El Niño of 2015, a large number of pelagic red crab became available, and that is what we found in most of their stomachs. Then anchovy numbers began to increase and we started seeing more anchovy in their stomachs as well. It all depends on what prey species are available in a given year or season, which is likely linked to environmental conditions and larger-scale oceanographic regimes.*

Q: At what depth do they spend most of their time and why?

A: *PBFT are able to regulate their internal body temperature, which allows them to dive deeper and spend more time at depth than other more tropical tuna like skipjack and yellowfin tunas. The depth PBFT can inhabit ranges from surface waters to depths of at least 1,700 feet. Typically PBFT spend most of their time in waters down to 600 feet. Available food and the depth of the thermocline and mixed layer likely dictates where PBFT spend most of their time. The thermocline is the depth at which there is a shift from warm surface waters to cool deep waters. The thermocline depth is known to vary from year to year depending on oceanographic conditions. For example, in 2011 Commercial Passenger Fishing Vessels reported very little surface feeding or activity, and usually found PBFT down deep below the thermocline in waters from 150 to 300 feet. The lack of shallower forage species like anchovy, sardines and pelagic red crab in 2011 probably influenced their depth distribution. Stomach contents during 2011 suggested PBFT were targeting small fish, squid and crustaceans that are associated with what is called the "deep scattering layer." Fast forward to 2015 when shallower surface-oriented species like red crab and anchovy became more available and the majority of PBFT were feeding in surface waters.*

Q: What is their range of temperature tolerance and what is their favorite temp range?

A: *PBFT can endure temperatures from approximately 44 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit, with their preferred temperature being between 64 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit.*

Q: How deep do they/can they feed?

A: *Where PBFT feed depends on what kind of food is available. If there are a lot of epipelagic prey around (surface-oriented fish like anchovy) then they will probably feed near the surface. Alternatively, during the years where there is little visual surface activity or shal-*

BLUEFIN TUNA/next

CHRIS MINNICK with a trophy bluefin tuna.

Bluefin tuna...

Continued from previous page

lower prey around they are probably feeding deeper in the water column on mid-water prey such as small squid, fish and crustaceans. They can dive quite deep and remain active in colder waters due evolutionary adaptation that allows them to regulate their internal body temperature. This likely results in them being able to feed throughout their known depth range if prey is encountered.

Q: Why do these PBFT seem more likely bite for recreational anglers later in the summer versus earlier in the spring, even though they are equally abundant during this time period?

A: *When seasonal water temperatures warm, many fish species become more active and feed more regularly as they devote their energy towards growth. That said, fishing in recent years has been good during all months of the year. For example, the Shogun returned home December 30, 2020 with limits of bluefin tuna from 150 to 350 pounds. Additionally, one of the best bites I ever experienced for smaller bluefin tuna was on the Tribute in February near the Cortes Bank. So personally, I do not think time of year really makes a difference. The lack of boats on the water during winter and spring months might be why there are less PBFT caught during those months. If there are no boats out looking for tuna, then it stands to reason that no tuna will be caught.*

Q: If we maintain a clean ocean in the Eastern Pacific, could this PBFT fishery be long term or will it cycle just like it has historically along with albacore?

A: *The California Current is an extremely productive area. The waters of California are characterized by extreme upwelling, which provides ample nutrients for primary production of forage fish, and is referred to as an eastern boundary current. The high productivity of the California Current during years of high upwelling conditions provides nutrients for the base of the food chain, which in turn become food for larger pelagic fish, mammals and seabirds to the area due to the large amount of available forage. Increases in the number of fish observed locally may be a result of changes in the proportion of fish migrating to the eastern Pacific. We still do not fully understand what "motivates" bluefin in the WPO to migrate to the EPO as juveniles. It is also possible that conditions along the West Coast may have shifted schools further north. Recent management measurements are also likely influencing the numbers and size of PBFT encountered by recreationally fishermen in recent years. There is no evidence that localized pollution influences migrations either to or from the EPO.*

Q: What are the forces contributing to these cycles?

A: *The forces that contribute to cycles in the stock and fishery are challenging to pinpoint and still will require a lot more targeted research to better understand. What we are seeing right now off our coast is likely being driven by both fisheries regulations and environmental conditions. Fisheries regulations have reduced fisheries mortality in the EPO. Additionally, environmental factors and food availability probably influences how many fish migrate to the EPO and how long they remain in the EPO.*

Q: What is the percentage of decline in PBFT biomass from pre-fishing times? Is this percentage the same for both juvenile and adult fish?

A: *The recent stock assessment completed in 2020 concluded that Pacific bluefin tuna are at historic lows (about 4% compared to the biomass if no fishing had taken place). Stock assessments of PBFT are based off the numbers of adult PBFT, or the spawning biomass. The amount and rate of PBFT harvested each year continues to be high. As a result, the population is considered to be overfished and subject to overfishing. An international rebuilding effort is underway to reduce fishing impacts, bring the stock back to healthy levels, and ensure the sustainability of future harvests. With the current regulations in place, the population is projected to recover.*

Q: Are all countries complying with quotas? Who is and who is not?

A: *Both the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission are international commissions which have monitoring schemes in place to evaluate how each member is complying with measures. While members have agreed to manage their catch to the limits, there are provisions that require a nation to deduct catch from future catch limits if they exceed a catch limit.*

Q: Do you personally think the current limits on recreational fishing and quotas for commercial fishing promote sustainability and restoration of stocks?

A: *Commercial and recreational fisheries for bluefin tuna in the EPO are under strict regulations and anglers should focus on complying with those regulations. Based on the 2020 stock assessment, which was an international collaboration, international management has put limits on harvest, and the rebuilding plan is expected to work based on stock assessment*

BLUEFIN TUNA/next

200-POUND-PLUS BLUEFIN heads ready for dissection at NOAA's Southwest Fisheries Science Center.

MARK DEBELLO with a large grade bluefin.

Bluefin tuna...

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Bluefin tuna...

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BROWN'S 277 POUNDER ate a Nomad Buffalo jig.

THE AUTHOR FOOLS ANOTHER ONE with a jig on the *Royal Star.*

Caught Late February 2021; 200-lb. Clear Grand Slam Mono connected to 175-lb. Clear 100% Fluorocarbon Leader

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