

Most big-game fishermen have a touch of Hemingway in them. The really smart ones – that’s right, you – may have a dash of Einstein, too. Now you can combine the two, as you catch the fish of a lifetime and make a contribution to science, just offshore of Morehead City.

The fish are bluefin tuna, Hemingway-sized at 250-to-500 pounds and up. The science is supplied by Stanford University professor Dr. Barbara Block and her team of researchers from the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California and Duke Marine Lab in Beaufort. Since 1996, their Tag-A-Giant program has placed more than 900 electronic tags in bluefin tuna and established itself as one of the largest efforts on any species of animal in the world.

Tag-A-Giant comes to town in January (although the fish often start to show up in December). Their research has shown that bluefin wintering on our coast come from all over the Atlantic – New England, Ireland, and even the Mediterranean.

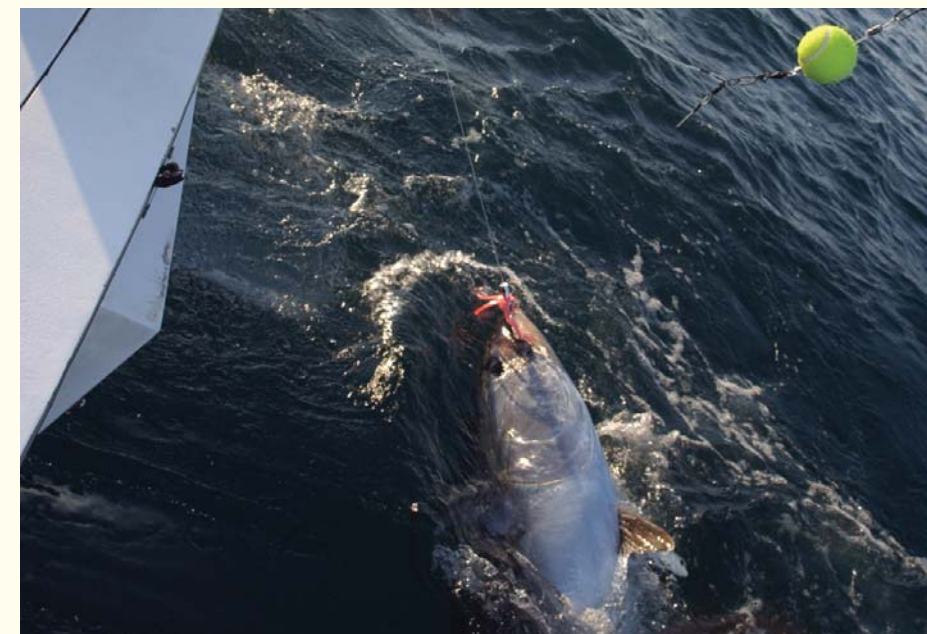
“A bluefin is warm-blooded and goes wherever it wants,” Block said. “This is one of the best ‘lunch stops’ in the ocean,”

When it comes to being a research subject, the bluefin tuna is no white lab rat. One of the most magnificent predators on earth, the bluefin can reach 10 feet in length and weigh well over 1000 pounds. In short bursts it can swim 90 mph. At a comfortable cruising speed it covers heroic distances – a Pacific bluefin tagged off the West Coast swam to Japan and back, logging 18,000 nautical miles in 600 days.

A fish like that doesn’t volunteer to be tagged, so this research program – the most sophisticated of its kind in the world – is dependent on the North Carolina captains who have volunteered their time and effort to make Tag-A-Giant a success.

“It is only through the effort and cooperation of the charterboat fleet, both in Morehead City and in Hatteras, that this research has been brought to life,” said Block. “We are really a team.”

Capt. Bob Eakes of Buxton was one of the first members of that team. In 1996 he helped test the Tag-A-Giant concept aboard his Bullfrog on the waters near Cape Hatteras. Eakes and renowned big-game expert Peter Wright developed the unique method by which the giants can be handed



off from boat to boat using, of all things, a tennis ball.

By 1999 the Delta Dawn’s Pete Manuel and others had convinced Barbara Block that she could tag more and larger fish in the Cape Lookout area. That year she moved her seasonal East Coast headquarters to the Duke Marine Lab where, 15 years earlier, she had done blue marlin research for her Ph D thesis.

This year, when Block and her grad students came to town the weather gave them a welcome break with record temperatures in the 70’s and a spell of calm seas.

Wednesday, January 12, would prove to be, in Block’s words, “one of the hottest days in the history of Tag-A-Giant.” And she wasn’t referring just to the weather. The team placed tags on 13 bluefin. At least ten boats transferred fish up to 95-inches to the two surgery boats, John Jenkins’ *Calcutta* and Dale Britt’s *Forty-Something*. Although they will occasionally catch a fish themselves and tag it, the primary job of these two boats is to dart around the fleet and collect fish.

On that warm Wednesday, the 56-foot *Ashley Renaie* caught two “adolescent” tunas up to 77 inches and handed them off, making the whole difficult routine look easy. Her owner and captain, Tommy Fletcher, is a top dog when it comes to catching North Carolina bluefin for tagging – and he has the trophies to prove it. Tag-A-Giant sponsors an annual contest, which Fletcher and his mate, Chris Johnson, have won the past five years. In addition to being a top captain, Fletcher is also a master boat builder who turned out both the *Ashley Renaie* and *Calcutta* at his personal boatworks in Durham.

That morning Tommy’s crew included a writer and photographer, but the real work was done by the mate, along with Capt. Bruce Pollock of *Waverunner* and Capt. Junior Johnson of *Waste Knot*, who came along to catch bluefin and help with the hand-offs. (This Junior Johnson is no relation to Chris or to the moonshine-running/NASCAR-driving legend of the same name.)

Casting off lines at 5:30 A.M., the *Ashley Renaie* powered out through Beaufort Inlet in complete darkness and set a course for the Knuckle Buoy just offshore of the shoals. For close to an hour the only light

# Battling Bluefin *for Fun* and *Science*

BY BILL MORRIS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT TAYLOR



sources visible were the running lights of the fleet and the blinking beacon of Cape Lookout light. Then, just as a spectacular sunrise torched the sky east of Lookout Shoals, Pete Manuel's voice came over the radio. *Delta Dawn* was already hooked up.

*Ashley Renaie's* first bite comes soon after, announced by the whip-crack release of the right rigger clip. The reel is a Penn International 130ST with the drag set tight enough for pulling stumps, but the bluefin peels off line like the big gold reel is in free spool.

"I just won five dollars!" Chris Johnson yells. The crew had a pool going, a \$5 bet on which rod would get the first bite. There is a loud argument over the \$5 even as Chris jams the bent-but rod into the gimbaled bucket and gets himself set in the fighting chair.

Amid all the trash-talking the fish continues to take line until the rest of the gear can be cleared. Junior Johnson and Bruce Pollock are both experienced captains, and



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both work as fast as they can, but Tommy Fletcher gives them some encouragement from the bridge anyway.

"We gotta go!" he shouts around his chaw of Red Man. Then, as the last planer is flung aboard, he yells, "Lines clear! We're gonna go get him!" Planting his backside against the helm, he throws both 600-horse Volvo diesels into reverse to back down on the fish. Chris, his cap turned around backwards, is cranking as fast as he can and catching saltwater in the face as the sea breaks against the transom. Junior turns the fighting chair to keep him pointed at the fish. Everybody is yelling at once. They've done this before –

17 times in just the past week alone – but they're still excited, and talking trash.

"Get you some!"

"He's gonna be hot!"

"Who's drivin' this thing?"

"You do your part. Crank!"

"Barb is gonna be so happy. So happy!"

In the midst of all the action Tommy

makes a radio call and *Calcutta* is on the way with its crew of tuna researchers. As they arrive Bruce Pollock has the leader in his hand. It's not a particularly big fish, maybe 260 pounds.

"We got three yesterday, one was 97 inches," Tommy says. "Got him in eight minutes." A well-fed bluefin that size might weigh close to 600 pounds.

Now it's time to "play ball," and transfer the linebacker-sized fish over to *Calcutta*.

John Jenkins positions his stern about ten yards from ours, and long-time Tag-A-Giant mate Daryl Brower throws a tennis ball across the gap. The ball carries with it a swivel attached to a 300-pound leader from a rod and reel on the surgery boat. Pollock quickly clips the two lines together, swivel-to-swivel, and cuts the *Ashley Renaie's* line with scissors. There's more shouting between boats as the line comes tight on *Calcutta* and the bluefin is brought aboard through its tuna door.

Dr. Block and her crew do their tagging and take measurements and within minutes the fish is back through the door and swimming away. Pretty amazing when you consider that she has made a one-inch incision in the fish's belly, implanted a computerized "archival" tag, and sutured the incision – all on a rolling deck, fifteen miles offshore, in January.

"We have worked in the most trying conditions you can think of," she says. "Including snow storms."

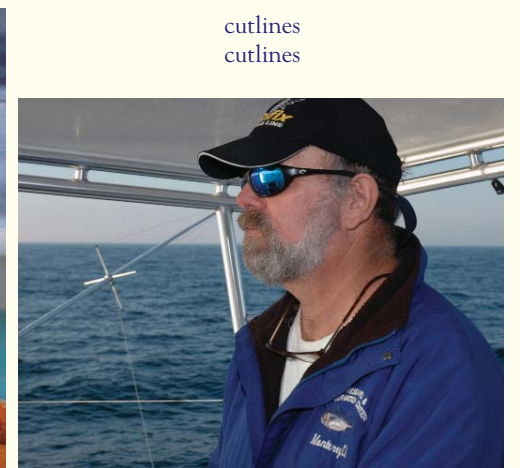
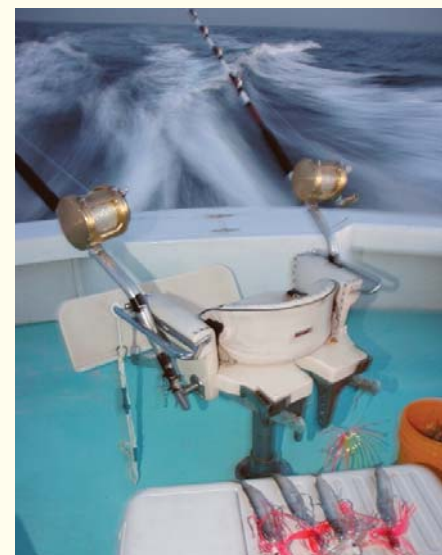
"Our charters really like doing it," says Tommy Fletcher. The other captains agree, saying that people come specifically to catch a fish that will swim away with "their" tag. As an incentive Tag-A-Giant gives away sporty hats to the anglers who hand off their fish.

As it happens, that hottest of January days was one of Tommy Fletcher's last on the water – at least for a while. He is selling the *Ashley Renaie* and, as they say, "getting out."

But the Morehead City and Atlantic Beach docks will continue to be busy in December and January, as long as anglers are drawn to the lure of big-game fishing. Barbara Block expects to see the bluefin here again next winter, and for many winters after that.

"I think there's an optimistic future for bluefin if they are managed correctly," she says. Her research, and the contributions of the Morehead City charterboat fleet, should be valuable in forming those management plans.

Information on bluefin tuna charters is available at [www.sunnync.com](http://www.sunnync.com).



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