

Mahi-mahi, *On the Fly*

BY BILL MORRIS
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“Faster, Brian! Reel faster!”

Above us, on the flying bridge of the Bluewater, Captain Ken Kramer was shouting orders as he watched a lit-up mahi-mahi charging a trolled ballyhoo. He wanted his mate, Brian Hogg, to make sure the hungry bull didn’t catch up to its breakfast.

“Snatch it away from him! Now!”

Away from him? You’re probably thinking, isn’t the fish supposed to eat the bait?

The answer would normally be, “Well, d’uh!” But this was not a normal fishing trip, or a normal bait. The ballyhoo being snatched by mate Brian Hogg (rhymes with Bogue) was rigged as a teaser. It didn’t even have a hook. The other three baits in our spread were likewise shooting blanks. But the object of this exercise would not be Zen fishing, Grasshopper.

“Get your fly in the water!” was the next order shouted from the bridge. Our angler, Beaufort realtor Arthur Harrison, false cast the fly rod in his hand one time and threw his flash-decorated hook right in the path of the dolphin, who, with the ballyhoo suddenly gone, was barreling around in our wake like Teddy Kennedy at a picked-over buffet. The pink-and-blue fly – a Ken Kramer creation – was instantly inhaled and the fish took off on a run, jumping several times before he was brought to the boat. There were high fives on deck and a war whoop of relief from the bridge. We’d accomplished our mission, catching dolphin on the fly.

Later, Captain Kramer would show us another way to “fly” – by dangling a flying-fish lure from a kite.

The dolphin, also called mahi-mahi (to distinguish it from Flipper), is one of the most prolific and fastest-growing fish in the ocean. Sheer numbers and a constant appetite make him the most popular of all offshore game fish, a popularity enhanced by his willingness to stick around off the North Carolina coast for six or more months of the year. If you’ve only seen dolphin in a market or on the dock, then you’ve never had a chance to fully appreciate the array of neon colors that Nature has used to decorate a single fish. Using hookless baits to tease him up to within fly casting range gives you the added thrill of seeing what a fish that’s “lit up” looks like. As he’s homing in on a bait his head and back pulsate in a hot, ultraviolet teal while his tail and fins glow electric lemon/lime. It’s a similarly brilliant color scheme to what

you'd see in a parrot, but Polly on her perch is a dull thing compared to a charging mahi in the gin-clear waters of the Gulf Stream.

(I'm no marine biologist, but something tells me that Mr. Bull Dolphin may not be sure too if he's going to consume that bally-hoo, or mate with it. Then again, we've all made that mistake on occasion. Right?)

To most fly fishermen, going 35 miles out to cast into 150-foot deep water sounds like sheer folly. Steeped in the lore of rivers like the AuSable and writers like Roderick Haig-Brown, your average fly-fishing Jonathan (the II) often has trouble thinking outside the Orvis-endorsed box. Saltwater fly fishing, despite its growing popularity, is still largely concentrated on four species: bonefish, permit, tarpon, and striped bass. Targeting offshore fish is a highly specialized sport that has been experienced by relatively few anglers, usually in exotic places like Costa Rica or Panama where sailfish live in numbers large enough to make it worthwhile to "chuck the chicken" (charter captain lingo for a short cast with a large feathered fly).

But now, aboard the Morehead City-based Bluewater, at least, North Carolina fly fishermen can catch big pelagic fish on fly tackle without spending a small fortune on airfare and a week at the Tropic Star Lodge. And, because Ken Kramer already has the tackle, you don't even need to invest in a heavy-weight fly rod and reel. (The last statement should come with a warning, though. This sport is so much fun that you will probably make a beeline from the dock to Joe Shute's or Harkers Island Tackle to gear up for your next opportunity.)

Of course, like any type of fishing it's not a sure thing, and Kramer is quick to acknowledge that fact. "You really need the right conditions," he says. "Not much wind or sea, not too many boats. But when it's happening there's not much that's like it."

With piercing blue eyes and a full white beard trimmed near Hemingway length, Kramer looks like a fisherman – a look he has earned by working the water from Cape May to Cat Cay. As captain of the Flying Fish, he even won the 1981 Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament. For the past three years he has operated the Bluewater, a custom 54-footer built by Harris Boatworks in Marshallberg, North Carolina. The week following our fly excursion, Ken would be fishing with the boat's owners, Greenville architect Jimmy Hite and his wife Earlene, on board. But for one perfect day the Bluewater was ours, and Arthur Harrison was in a lather about chucking the chicken.

"Bring it on!" he said, after catching the first one.



Cutlines



And Kramer and Hogg brought it. Before the day was through six good-sized dolphin would be brought to the boat on fly tackle. Harrison, a relatively inexperienced fly caster, had no problem hooking the mahi or fighting them on a 10-weight rod.

"It's pretty spectacular to see them all lit up like that," he said. "And you can easily whip one of these fish with a fly rod. It doesn't take a big gold reel."

"I just like fly fishing," Kramer says. When he takes time off from his charterboat chores, he and his wife usually head to a quiet corner of the Bahamas where he stalks bonefish

every day. That he can still get excited after 34 years in the sport fishing business says a lot about Kramer's eagerness to experiment with new techniques. He's especially keen on the latest rage in the charterboat fleet, kite fishing.

Imagine Charlie Brown without a kite-eating tree within forty miles, and you'll get some sense of the lunatic rush of flying a kite over the Gulf Stream from the bridge of a 56-foot sportfisherman. With two release clips strung along the kite line and flying-fish lures dangling at a height that lets them dip in and out of the waves, kite fishing turns backyard fun into big-game bingo.

The technique is usually employed to catch leader-shy yellowfin tuna, but on the day we tried it worked well for dolphin, too. The strike was a visual treat: a neon teal back

streaking across the surface and attacking the airborne plug.

Our day had progressed from mahi on the fly, to flying kites, to flying mahi.

As with any fishing, targeting dolphin depends on the season and the conditions. But if the mahi aren't cooperating, Kramer also has another species in mind, like wahoo and billfish. "If the sails are as thick as they were last year," he says, "I know we could have a shot at one on the fly rod."

So, if you've been saving up for a trip to Panama, it might be smart to break into that piggy bank and try your luck on the Crystal Coast first. The excitement of chicken chucking and kite flying are waiting in your own big blue backyard. The number for Bluewater Charters is 252.726.2476.