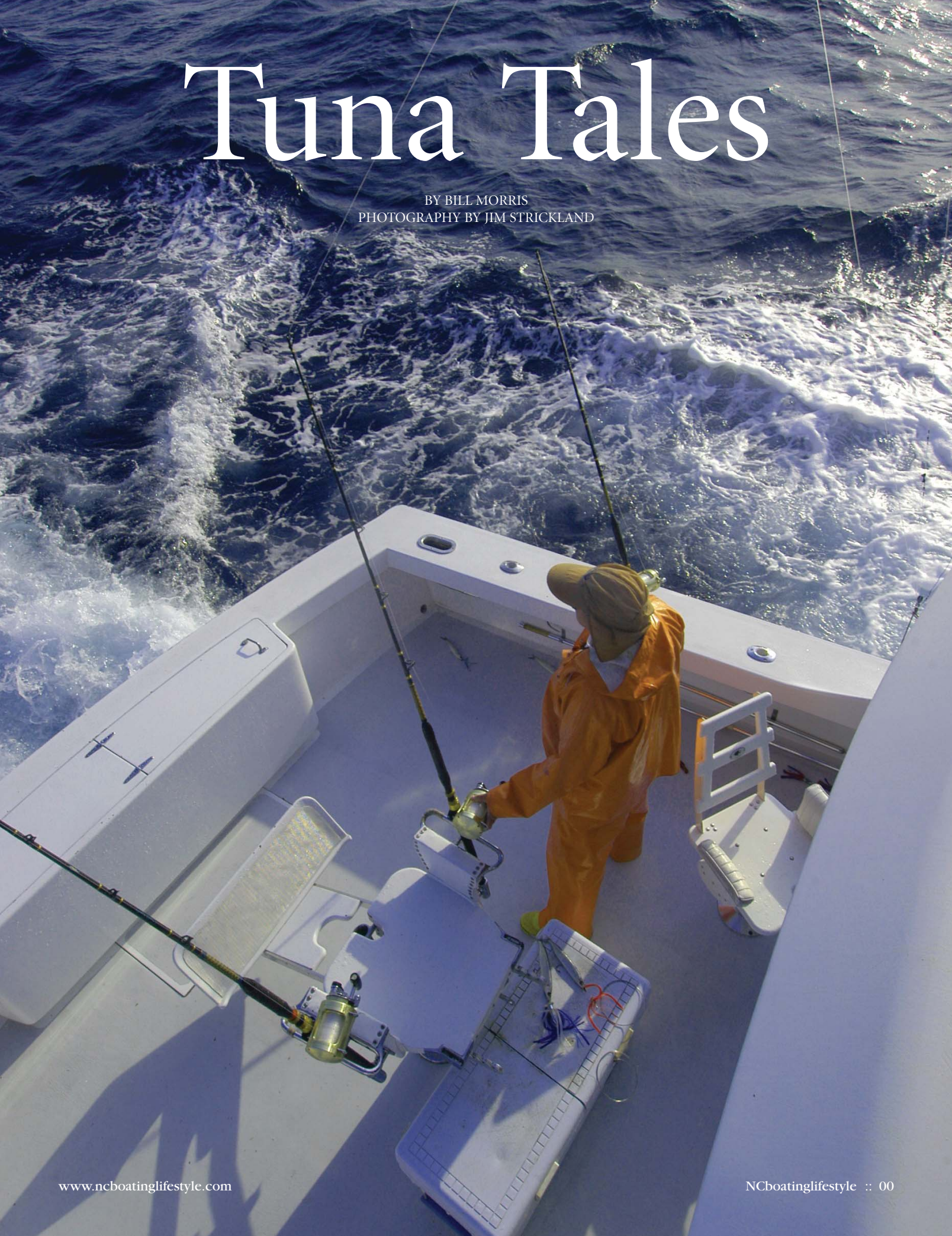


Tuna Tales

BY BILL MORRIS
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prospect of a little rain was going to make us head for the barn early.

Jeff Becker and mate Tim Leroux with a bright yellowfin.



David Myers, the author, and George Evins (L-R) do the cranking after a multiple hook-up.

Big Tim puts the steel to the meal.



The cockpit of the *Dancin' Outlaw* was like a floating three-chair barbershop with a customer in every seat. But, instead of getting a relaxing haircut, each of us was sitting in a fighting chair cranking a gold Tiagra 50-wide for all we were worth. Sure we wanted to catch all three yellowfin tuna that were still half a football field away from the boat. But for me, at least, there was a little extra adrenalin pumping in my arm because the squall line off to starboard seemed to get darker and closer with every turn of the handle.

"We're gonna get killed here in a minute," Becker said, very matter-of-fact. He didn't mean that literally, of course, but still I cranked with all the mojo I could muster. When we had all three yellowfin in the box I fully expected to see the mate start reeling in lines so we could run from that squall. But instead he started dropping back the teasers and throwing fresh baits over the transom. The current rip we'd found was so productive there was no way that the prospect of a little rain was going to make us head for the barn early.

In the end, all of our predictions of impending doom amounted to nothing. The squall rained itself out without ever reaching us. The heavens had decided to smile on us, and the fish gods, too.

Plus, it didn't hurt that we had Thomas Wood as our captain.

For the Morehead City fleet, late March, April, and early May are

the yellowfin tuna months. The fish are migrating and they are more numerous, hungrier, and more catchable than the rest of the year. The problem is that in the spring the tuna are often more predictable than the weather, and the possibility of fishing in 4-6 foot seas keeps many would-be bluewater anglers from booking charters, no matter how good the fishing might be. But that's their mistake. There's not a boat on the Morehead waterfront that can't get you to

the Gulf Stream and back in safety and as much comfort as anyone ought to expect out of the Atlantic Ocean. If it's too rough the captain simply won't go. And if your skipper does make the call that it's too rough, please don't try to talk him into going anyway. Down East they have a word for what you'll get, right about the time you reach the Knuckle Buoy – a real good mommickin'.

Capt. Thomas Wood's reputation, as both a good fisherman and good guy, is well deserved. His *Dancin' Outlaw* won the 1999 Big Rock tournament (with a 600 pound blue marlin cranked in by brother David Wood), the 2002 Cape Fear Blue Marlin tournament, and the 1997 N.C. Ducks Unlimited Band the Billfish tournament. Last year he missed winning the Ocean City White Marlin Tournament – and about \$300,000 – by 1/2 inch. The boat, his third *Dancin' Outlaw*, is a 56-foot C&L Custom built in 2002, and its 17-foot beam makes for a roomy cockpit and a better ride. She runs twin



Dancin' Outlaw is a 56-foot C&L Custom built in 2002.

3406 CAT Diesels, each with 600 horsepower, and will cruise at 26 knots. That doesn't make her the fastest boat on the waterfront, but darn close.

Tuna are Capt. Wood's favorite fish to catch, "except for a blue marlin, of course," he is quick to add. "The best thing about yellowfin," he says, "is the multiple strikes. When you get five or six on at one time, that's fun."

Enough fun (and good eating) to make a dingbatter like me set his alarm for 4:15.

It was still O:Dark:30 when those big Cat engines started to whine and we made our way out Beaufort Inlet. This spring the inshore water has been slow to warm up, so the southwest swell we headed into packed the extra punch that is carried by denser, colder water. It was a little bit hobbly-gobbly, as the Ocracokers say, and the spray curtains on the flying bridge as well as the side windows were getting fire-hosed pretty good. This didn't stop Becker from falling dead asleep on one of the couches in the spacious salon. The rest of our party – George Evins of Oxford, David Myers of Raleigh, and photographer Jim Strickland – either lounged inside or sat on the cockpit iceboxes watching the frothy wake tangle with the white-capped waves.

We ran for over two hours to a spot somewhere south of that fish-attracting hump known as The Big Rock. Because it was a Thursday, with rain squalls and a possible



Stand-up fighting is better sport.



Oxford's George Evins hoists a nice tuna.



Back home – the Big Rock Dock, Morehead City.

gale in the forecast, the fleet that day was considerably reduced. The Calcutta was there, Bill Collector, and maybe a half-dozen others. As soon as the engines wound down the mate, Tim Leroux (pronounced La-roo'), started tossing baits overboard. Twenty minutes later he was sticking a gaff into the Neandrathal brow of a bull dolphin. "The skunk's done jumped out of the

boat," Tim said merrily, dropping the mahi-mahi into the fish box. About six-foot-three and plenty stout, Tim has fished most of the bluewater hotspots, including Bimini and Isla Mujeres in Mexico. He was born and raised in the beach town of Melbourne, Florida, and his easygoing manner made the time between strikes pass amiably. A charter party like ours, made up of boat owners who have caught fish on their own (probably through pure blind luck), can be a professional mate's worst nightmare. But Timmy took in all in stride, including the dolphin that one of us flipped into the cockpit instead of the box. Big bull dolphin have been known

to do a lot of damage to both anglers and gear, but this was a small one that our team of 'experts' managed to subdue without too much mayhem.

Offshore fishing is not quite the needle-in-a-haystack proposition that it can appear. The captains look for temperature breaks, bottom ledges, current rips, or sargassum weed. This particular day we'd managed to catch several fish,



Headed south from Beaufort Inlet, just before dawn.

including one wahoo, without finding much of any of the above. But then, about the time we were having lunch – sardines covered in Louisiana Hot Sauce – Thomas found what he likes to call "something to fish on." In this case it was a classic "rip" – an area of turbulent blue water caused by the friction of two different currents rubbing up against one another. In the middle of a sea that was mainly gentle two-foot swells we found ourselves in a patch of four and five-footers stacked close together with whitecaps on top. Here and there inside the rip were little patches of weed.

For the next two hours it was one knock-down after another, including the triple-header that we landed with one eye on that bluffing squall. We didn't miss many of the opportunities, and most of the fish were caught standing up using the Bimini belt. Our final score was seven yellowfin up to about 40 pounds, five dolphin, and a wahoo. There was plenty of meat to go around, and plenty of stories, too.

One of the best stories was the one about how our chartered boat got its unusual name. The original *Dancin' Outlaw* is Jesse "Jesco" White, a traditional mountain dancer from the hills near Thomas Wood's hometown of Fayetteville, West Virginia.



An offshore slam – tuna, dolphin, and wahoo.

Jesco's performances are the stuff of legend, and a documentary film that was made about his life – complete with scenes inside his house trailer decorated with Elvis memorabilia – is a cult classic, (And I do mean cult: the sequel features Roseanne Barr and Tom Arnold, along with Frank Zappa's little girl Dweezle.)

"Did you know the real Dancin' Outlaw?" I asked Thomas.

"A little bit. I saw him around, in bars and stuff."

"So why did you name your boat after Jesco?"

"Well," he said, brushing a hand through his crew-cut dark hair. "My brother and I were partners in the first boat, and we couldn't agree on any one woman's name. So we called it *Dancin' Outlaw*."

You can find her tied up at the dock in the middle of the Morehead City waterfront. Or, if you're real lucky, you'll see her dancing in a current rip somewhere on the hot blue waters of the Gulf Stream.

Dancin' Outlaw Charters
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