

ADVENTURE IN THE DEEP

Albacore, bigeye, yellowfin—this season looks promising for Montauk’s thrilling deep-sea tuna fishing.

BY JAMES STURZ PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG YOUNG



It's 3:15 AM, and the boat *Above the Ground* has suddenly slowed from 20 knots to 5 knots. Kevin Sacco flips on the lights in the galley, pulls on his PVC overalls and rubber boots, and walks outside into the dark to start tying tackle. A few minutes later, Joe Stavola joins him, and the two men start setting lines and filling the wake with bait—ballyhoo impaled on 42-inch-wide spreaders.

We are 90 miles south-southwest of the Montauk Yacht Club, where we had set out from four hours before with the single goal of catching tuna: yellowfin, bigeye, and albacore. It's mid-June and we are aboard the first run of the season for the 60-foot *Above the Ground*. Even before we pull out, Captain Jay Flynn showed us an automated fishing report of “where the water was,” because that’s where we’d be heading—to the sweet spot where colder currents, thick with tuna, meet warmer ones, rich with bait.



Even though the *Above the Ground* has a "fighting chair" for reeling in big fish, the fishermen prefer padded fish-fighting belts with plastic sockets to brace the rods. "That's how we do it here," says Andy Sabin (CENTER).



ABOVE: A rod and reel on *Above the Ground*; Captain Jay Flynn, who prefers following trails of hungry whales and dolphins, instead of using the fish finder, to discover the tuna sweet spot. "Trust the whales and dolphins," he says, "because they're smart. Once they find the fish, they'll stick around." NEXT PAGE, FROM LEFT: Yellowfin on their way to Montauk Yacht Club's cleaning station; a ballyhoo on a Joe Shute lure; Kevin Sacco aboard *Above the Ground*.

"We stand on our feet and use a harness, so it's really man versus fish."
—ANDY SABIN

"We're looking for the perfect temperature break," says Andy Sabin, the Amagansett conservationist and philanthropist who owns the boat, "but it's also luck."

Instead of sleeping, I follow the men onto the deck. Lines from the boat's 10 rods stretch like sutures into the inky depths. No one speaks. What is there to talk about, anyway, except maybe the fish? We start to troll.

THE SWEET SPOT

We're heading to the Canyons, deep cuts in the continental shelf that extend as far east as Hydrographer Canyon, 90 miles southeast of Nantucket and west to Hudson Canyon, a submarine extension of the Hudson Valley that runs some 400 nautical miles out to sea from New York Harbor before connecting to the ocean basin two more miles straight down—making it twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. The idea is that underwater structures help trap bait, which then attracts migrating tuna. As the light comes up, I note the coordinates, and when I plug them into Google Earth, I see that we are hugging aquatic cliffs.

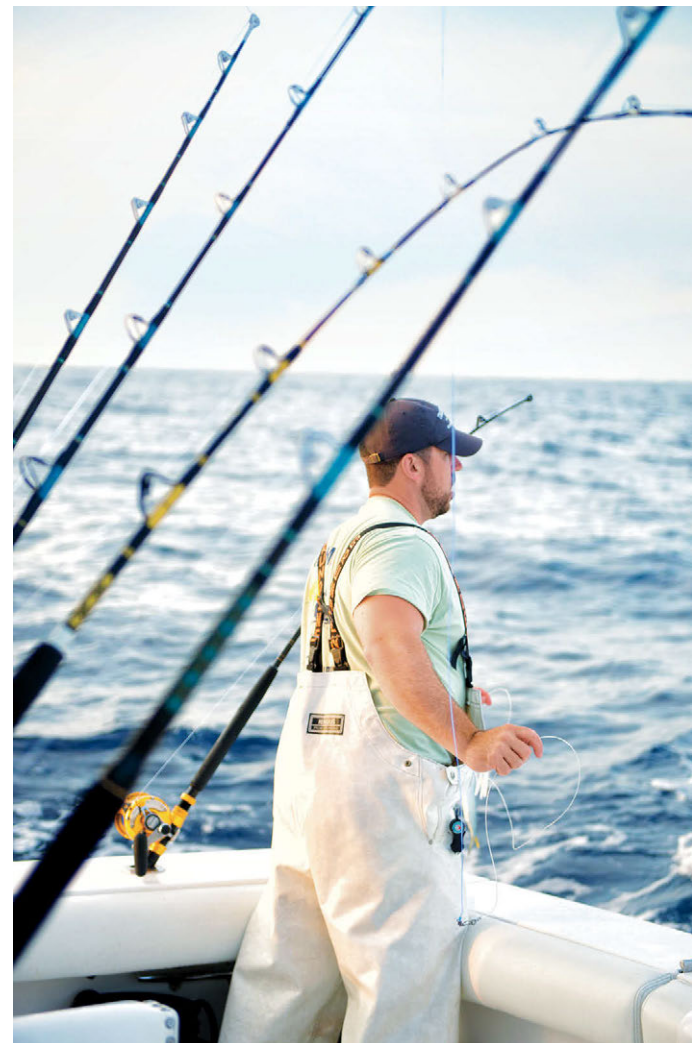
Sacco and other men like him describe the

Canyons as a fisherman's Disneyland. "There's so much out there," he says, "and you don't know what you'll find. You're there to fish, but it could be square miles of whales, porpoises, dolphins, and sea turtles. Some guys come out for three-night benders because it's the best place on earth." When we spot a humpback and a dolphin, Captain Flynn knows to follow them. There's a fish finder beneath the boat, which operates using sonar—the tiny blips signify bait, the larger ones signal game, and clumps of blips mean schools. "But the other way is to trust the whales and dolphins, because they're smart," Flynn says. "Once they find the fish, they'll stick around."

Sometime after 4 AM, the stars start to fade and I can make out a hint of morning clouds. By 5:15, we've watched the sun rise and we're tucking into breakfast. Then at 6 AM precisely, mayhem hits.

The lines start jumping.

Although *Above the Ground* has a fighting chair, Sabin doesn't like to use it. Instead, we use padded fish-fighting belts with plastic sockets to brace the rods. "That's how we do it here. We stand on our feet and use a harness, so it's really man versus fish," Sabin explains. "We give the fish a chance." For that



sporting reason, Sabin refuses to keep any bluefin tuna, because the species is endangered. The yellowfin, though, are another story.

I watch the guys strap on belts and start to reel, but it's not long before more lines are bouncing and every spare hand is needed on the deck. My lesson comes quickly: "Okay, put this on. Just keep reeling. Okay, start to reel! *Reel!*"

We catch four yellowfin right off, but they're small, perhaps 15 pounds. We throw them back. National Marine Fisheries Service mandates that any yellowfin kept must be at least 27 inches long. Yellowfin are common to 80 pounds, whereas a six-foot bigeye can easily weigh twice that or more. (The Atlantic record is 392.4 pounds, caught in the Canary Islands.) "Last year was the best season ever for bigeye," Sabin says. "I caught five 200-pounders, and I've been fishing out here for 40 years." Or, as Sacco tells me, "When you catch a bigeye, it's like going to the hottest club in the city and taking home the hottest girl."

There's little time to talk because 10 minutes later, the lines start bouncing again. I strap the belt back on and start to reel. I feel the burn in my arms

and lower back. It's 6:10 AM, and my muscles already ache.

"We leave at night, so we can start at first light," Sabin says. "But sometimes the fish start biting at night, and then we don't sleep at all." My yellowfin goes back into the water. "*That,*" says Sabin of my less-than-regulation-size catch, "was a rat. That's what we call them when they're that size."

And then there are more. The lines soon become a tangle, and we have to slip under one another's rods to keep them clear and straight. Suddenly the boat is full of chatter:

"That one's real!"

"I'll take it! I'll take it!"

"The rods are screaming!"

"Mine ain't a rat!"

"There's a nice fish on the end of that!"

Ripples of silver come into focus as the fish near the surface, dancing and disappearing, showing up again in a flash.

Sabin pats me on the shoulder, and says, "You've got a fish you're going to eat!"

And I do. The one I catch must weigh 40 pounds. Half a ballyhoo sticks from its mouth.

FISHING MONTAUK

Long Island's offshore tuna season runs from mid-June through October. Other offshore species include marlin, mahi mahi, dorado, wahoo, and shark. Inshore fishing is for striped bass, sea bass, fluke, flounder, bluefish, blackfish, mackerel, porgy, cod, and false albacore. More than 60 fishing charter boats sail from Montauk's marinas; additional charter boats sail from Sag Harbor and Shinnecock Inlet. Consult the marinas' websites for directories of their charters, or the Montauk Chamber of Commerce (montaukchamber.com). Rates vary according to the size of the boat and the duration and destination of the trip. For full-boat charters, expect to pay up to \$700 for a half-day inshore, \$1,100 for a full-day inshore, \$1,600 for a full-day offshore, and \$4,500 for an overnight in the Canyons. Beginner fishermen, up to age 16, can enroll at Flying Point Surf School Fish Camp (flyingpointsurfschool.com) in Sag Harbor through Labor Day.



Pulling a yellowfin out of the water. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: The day's catch of yellowfin on its way to Montauk Yacht Club's cleaning station; Andy Sabin filets on of the yellowfin tuna.



"You're there to fish, but it could be square miles of whales, porpoises, dolphins, and sea turtles. Some guys come out for three-night benders because it's the best place on earth."

—KEVIN SACCO

The white floor of the deck is a Rorschach blot of splattered blood and scales. Sacco gives me a fist bump. It's at once an enthusiastic and generous move, given what's on the other side of his hands.

We still hear the tuna thumping, once we secure them in the hold. The sound reminds me of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. This may be the age of TV shows like National Geographic Channel's *Wicked Tuna*, but it's also one of zombies. Why couldn't some of them be fish?

FISHERMAN'S BOUNTY

In just two hours, after catching seven keepers (among 20 yellowfin overall), Sabin decides it's enough. "To see this number of fish so early in the season means this one is going to be amazing," he says. Yellowfin take just two to three years to mature. They're efficient predators with burst velocities of 46 mph. "To see a lot of small ones like this means they're reproducing," Sabin explains. "You start fishing when you're 7 years old, and you never get past the thrill. Out here in the Canyons, that thrill is everywhere. There are loggerheads, 500-pound marlin, and mantas, too. When you fish, you don't know what you're going to get until you reel it

in—and you've got to reel it in, which is work. And I'm going to be 70."

There's a sleepiness onboard as we head back to Montauk at 30 knots. Everyone nods off, except for Captain Flynn. The deck is clean. The blood is gone. The fish are quiet now below. Somehow a second wind whips through us as soon as we reach the dock. What fisherman isn't proud of his catch? First there are photos, then the scale comes out. Our seven tuna end up weighing between 30 and 45 pounds each, and even as Sacco pushes them in a wheelbarrow to the marina's cleaning station, Sabin is making plans: "I've got 15 people in my office, and they'll get tuna. I've got four in my house, and they'll get tuna. And then I have a girlfriend, and other friends. And then there are all of you. And *you*." He points at me, smiling.

Sacco, Stavola, Flynn, and Sabin start filleting, while I buy a cooler and cadge a serving of wasabi from the yacht club's restaurant. The men cut like surgeons—maybe with a little less science, but with love and hunger, adrenaline and exhaustion.

I'm embarrassed to say that all I do is watch. And eat. Because once I start tearing off bits of pink flesh, I can't stop. **H**

MONTAUK MARINAS

Charter fishing trips can be coordinated through these local ports:

Gone Fishing Marina
467 E. Lake Dr., 668-3232;
gonefishingmarina78.com

Montauk Marine Basin
426 W. Lake Dr., 668-5900;
marinebasin.com

**Montauk Yacht Club
Resort & Marina**
32 Star Island Road, 668-3100;
montaukyachtclub.com

Snug Harbor Marina
3 Star Island Road, 668-2860;
montauksnugharbor.com

Star Island Yacht Club & Marina
59 Star Island Road, 668-5052;
starislandnyc.com

**Uihlein's Marina
Motel & Boat Rentals**
444 W. Lake Dr., 668-3799;
uihleinsmarina.com

Westlake Marina
352 W. Lake Dr., 668-5600;
westlake-marina.com

HOOK 'EM

Andy Sabin and Captain Jay Flynn recommend these Montauk fishing-boat charters.

My Mate, 41 feet,
mymatecharterboat.com

Reel Intensity, 64 feet,
facebook.com/reelintensity

Sea Wife IV, 51 feet,
seawife.com

Viking FiveStar, 65 feet,
vikingfivestar.com

SAVE THE DATES

The fifth annual Montauk Canyon Challenge, based at the Montauk Yacht Club, runs through July 26 and awards \$10,000 for the heaviest bigeye and \$5,000 each for the heaviest yellowfin and albacore. *Visit montaukcanyonchallenge.com.*

The 23rd annual Mako, Thresher, and Tuna Tournament at Star Island Yacht Club & Marina is August 21 and 22, with \$2,500 for the heaviest tuna. *Visit starislandnyc.com.*