

Going Fishing A FROG PILE OF TUNA

By
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We are homeward bound at the end of a gratifying day offshore trolling out of Virginia Beach when the wall of wind lays into us. Knowing we'd raised the beach, about two miles off our bow is somewhat reassuring. The storm's leading edge comes to us, packing a furious wind that kicks up spray like a Navy chopper flying low over water. Menacing, rolling black clouds reduce daylight to near dark as the captain switches on running lights at 5:00 in the afternoon. The storm intensifies as water spouts roil up off our port side. Then rain joins wind. A blanket of rain careens at us with such intensity that visibility drops to around 100 feet. Lightning continuously creases the sky accompanied by simultaneous crashing thunder claps, effectively imitating a ferocious artillery barrage, and we are in the middle of it. "Incoming!" someone in the deckhouse yells to a weak smattering of laughter. An attempt at



comic relief when all hands are struggling to fight off that initial wave of fear that comes when you do not feel in control of a new and threatening situation.

With visibility lost, wind and rain driving into us at full gale force, Capt. Jimmy "Zipper" Marten has no choice but to slow *Frog Pile* to a walk and ride out the storm with power on, bow into the blow and steadily building seas. The elements' full force become acutely evident when for a brief moment *Frog Pile* catches the brunt of the storm on her port bow quarter.

As her port profile begins to catch the wind, she heels noticeably to starboard. It takes a load of wind to heel a 55 footer with 16 ½ foot beam! Capt. Jimmy fights back, hammering the throttle down, reclaiming his course, and again taking the storm on nose-to-nose. He holds course while the assault rages.

After a grueling thirty minutes of battering wind, driving rain and continuous air-to-water lightning strikes, brightness returns to the sky, rain subsides and the tempest churns off to the east. Once *Frog Pile* is secure in her slip at Virginia Beach Fishing Center, Capt. Jimmy descends the flying bridge ladder to a well deserved round of applause from an appreciative and relieved fishing party. "Worst storm I've been out in for ten years," he exclaims while recounting the sharp jolts of electricity surging through his throttle hand with each nearby lightning strike.

During our run out to The Cigar, an aptly named elongated elevation on the ocean floor some fifty miles off Virginia Beach, Capt. Jimmy tells of a fantastic tuna bite. A catch of 19 yellowfins was accomplished aboard *Frog Pile* by 1:00 the previous day. He recommends that if we are to be as successful today, an early departure from the blue water may be in order, as thunderstorms are in the afternoon forecast.

Lines in at 7:05 AM. Martin Palmer leaps to the fighting chair at 7:15 and locks into combat with a solid fish. At age 13, Marten has been here before. He has joined us on offshore jaunts since he was knee high to a grasshopper. I know he can hold his own with this fish, and he engages the adversary with gusto. Ten minutes after the battle is joined, and only twenty minutes after the trolling spread is set, a hefty yellowfin tuna is the first of the day to land in the fish box.

Working our way through the morning, it becomes evident the tuna bite is good by most standards, but not up to yesterday's results. We troll a ten bait spread consisting of naked ballyhoo, dangles, a spreader bar, and a bird in front of a green machine - all tools of the trade. Steve, a Virginia Tech student with an intense desire to become a Navy Seal, mans the cockpit. Capt. Jimmy keeps a sharp eye on the trolling spread, depth sounder and the broad territory around us. He works over The Cigar and considers moving to the Northwest Lump or Wayne's World. He knows his signs, searching for slicks on the surface containing telltale temperature breaks, tide lines, weed lines or any structure or flotsam. Any number of subtle signs suggesting the presence of game fish.

The breeze is light, providing a soothingly calm rich blue ocean. Warm sun beats down on the cockpit warming us



to the bone. A rigger line slams down occasionally. We work through our rotation, enjoying the exhilaration of fighting large yellowfin tuna.

Martin Palmer seems to have a knack for catching dolphin. I once watched him land one after another on a run out of Pirates Cove. He catches two nice gaffers. His mother, Hunter, master of The Albemarle Angler, a delightful Orvis shop in Charlottesville, reels in a smaller mahi that qualifies as a heavy lifter. My wife, Tammye, does battle with the biggest tuna of the day, successfully using stand up tackle. She has a way of doing that. The girl can fish.

The sounder lights up red, marking eighty feet below. A large school of tuna pushes a wall of water beneath us. The red mark moves to fifty feet. The school is coming up. Maybe they are curious about all the commotion created

by our trolling spread. Off the starboard side, the smooth water erupts into a cascade of white spray as the marauding tuna hit the surface, blasting into a school of baitfish. The tuna have arrived where we want them.

A veteran Virginia Beach skipper once described the explosion of white water that erupts when an oncoming tuna thrashes a trolled bait as looking like "someone threw a safe in the water." Only a moment after the tuna break water off our starboard side, a similar scene detonates where the left rigger bait used to be. The line snaps from the outrigger pin. Melissa Easter takes to the chair, clinging to a deeply bowing rod as line dumps from the spool. Her husband Jeff steers the fighting chair smoothly as the fish charges from one side of the boat to the other during a blistering outward bound advance. Jeff, a natural-born hunter, is learning the ways of the cockpit well. Melissa dis-



A successful day of fishing

plays her usual grit while locked in a struggle with a powerful and determined tuna who is quite intent on sounding and staying deep. Pumping, reeling and sweating, she works her adversary grudgingly to boat's side. Steve performs an adept maneuver with the gaff, and the final beautifully marked yellowfin of a capital day lands in the fish box.

With a respectable catch of yellowfin tuna and dolphin iced down in the box, we call it a day, hoping to find ourselves snug in our slip with the fish cleaning crew at work long before the powerful afternoon thunder storm begins to brew up from the west. As Capt. Jimmy shoves the throttle forward, *Frog Pile's* thirty-eight inch single screw initiates the ride to the "barn." Some of the tourists on the beach are becoming a little nervous and

head for cover at the first rumblings of thunder off in the distance.

Virginia's blue water fishery is something of a well-kept secret. Most of the Mid- Atlantic's offshore publicity goes to her neighbors, the North Carolina Outer Banks to the south, and Ocean City, Maryland to the north, where large fleets take to the deep sea every day and flashy tournaments draw great crowds.

Maybe you will be fortunate enough to join Capt. Jimmy "Zipper" Marten on the *Frog Pile*. I'll let Capt. Jimmy tell you about a frog pile. I know he can take care of putting you on the fish, **and** he can bring you through a hell of a storm.



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