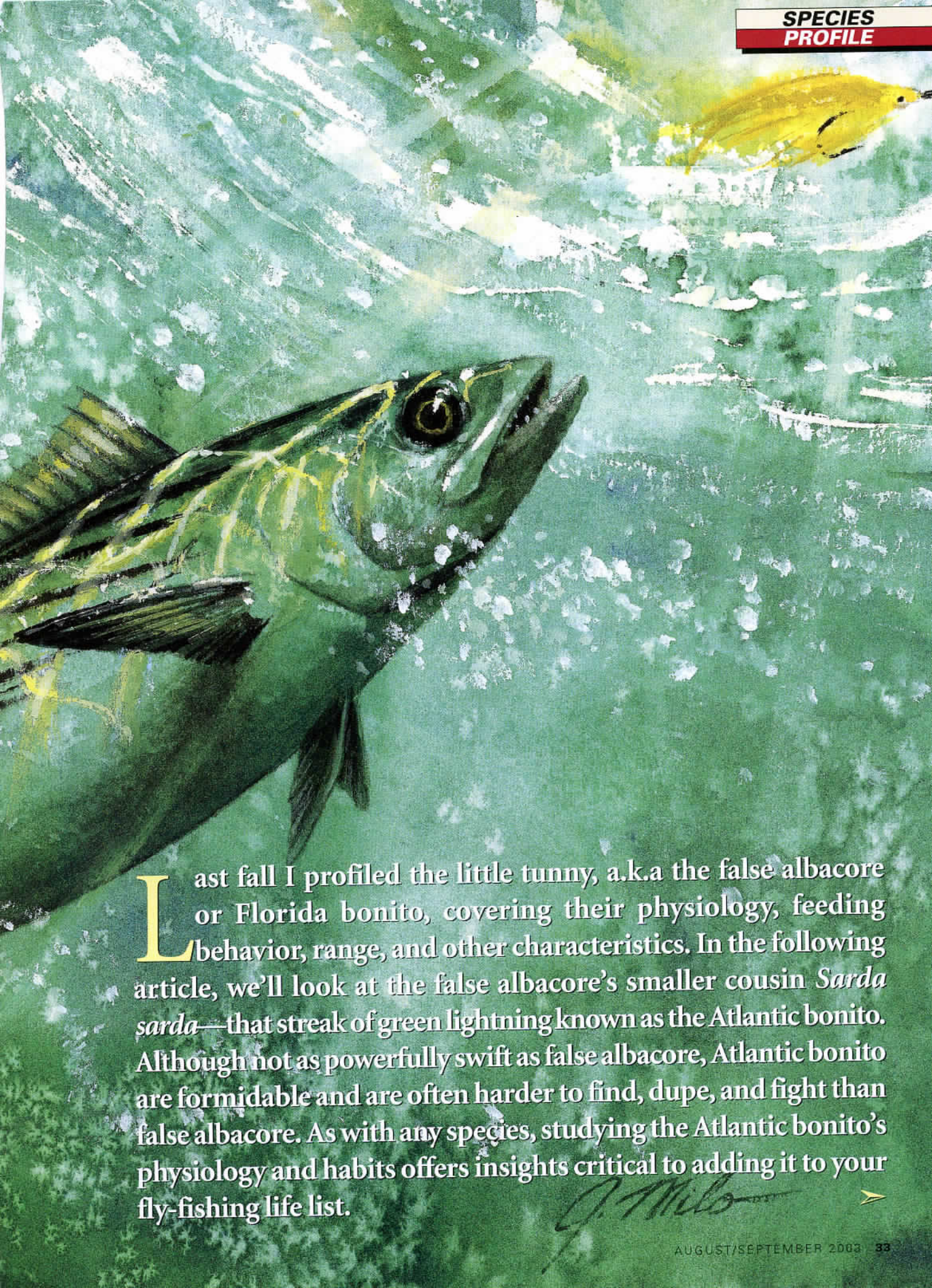


THE ETHERAL BONITO

*Like bird-watchers, fly fishers revel in discovering new species. *Sarda sarda*, or the Atlantic bonito, often seem as timid as birds, instantly dematerializing into the ocean wilderness.*

BY ED MITCHELL

JONATHAN MILO



Last fall I profiled the little tunny, a.k.a the false albacore or Florida bonito, covering their physiology, feeding behavior, range, and other characteristics. In the following article, we'll look at the false albacore's smaller cousin *Sarda sarda*—that streak of green lightning known as the Atlantic bonito. Although not as powerfully swift as false albacore, Atlantic bonito are formidable and are often harder to find, dupe, and fight than false albacore. As with any species, studying the Atlantic bonito's physiology and habits offers insights critical to adding it to your fly-fishing life list.

J. Mills

SONS OF SCOMBRIADAE

Atlantic bonito and false albacore are in the Scombridae family, which is to say they're mackerels; therefore, from a fly fisher's point of view, they come from one mighty fine family, for members of the mackerel clan are some of the most powerful finned critters on earth. Atlantic bonito grow rapidly—so rapidly, in fact, that during the first weeks of life they stretch an inch a week—but they are smaller than their albie cousins. Like little tunny, the Atlantic bonito's life span averages eight years.

In my home waters of the Northeast and throughout its range, Atlantic bonito occasionally top 10 pounds, with the rare beast weighing into the teens. The all-tackle record stands at 18 pounds, 4 ounces, but most run about four to eight pounds.

Atlantic bonito aren't difficult to distinguish from false albacore, but if you have a fish dinner in mind, you definitely won't want to mistake a bloody albie for its lighter-fleshed cousin. The Atlantic

bonito sports three to five prominent black lines running almost the length of its back, as opposed to the albie, which bears prominent green-and-blue longitudinal or oblique epaulettes—horizontal black lines on its back. Also, the little tunny is the only toothless mackerel—but you don't want to lip a bonito.

A COASTAL PELAGIC SPECIES

The Atlantic bonito is a coastal pelagic species: they mostly frequent ocean waters inside the continental shelf. They withstand water temperatures as low as 50 degrees and as high as 80 degrees, but prefer water between 60 and 72 degrees. Their seasonality along the Eastern seaboard depends partially upon local water temperatures. Generally, the coastal waters off the Carolinas get a spring run, while fly fishers off the Florida coast may still be catching them into late summer. In southern New England and the northeastern states, the run takes place

from mid-July through the end of October. In July, the sporadic, fussy schools show up well offshore, but by August the fish begin feeding more aggressively in shallower water.


The first step to finding them is to understand the type of water they inhabit. Atlantic bonito are extremely adaptable predators and forage from the water's edge right out to edge of the continental shelf. Although they can't tolerate extremely warm or cold water, given time they adjust to a wide range of salinity levels, so don't be surprised if you encounter bonito blitzing in an estuary. But while near shore, bonito gravitate to reefs—especially those near headlands—and to the mouths of bays, salt ponds, inlets, and to any bottom with steep contour lines. Although bonito aren't as current-oriented as false albacore, you still want to search out rips and areas of moving water regardless of the locale.

By nature, Atlantic bonito are schooling predators with a penchant for



FALSE ALBACORE

TIM LEARY

A man with a full grey beard and sunglasses is holding a large Atlantic bonito fish. The fish has a silver body with dark, wavy stripes. The man is wearing a dark jacket over a striped shirt. The background is a clear blue sky and a body of water.

The Atlantic bonito's dorsal fin (below) is fuller than the false albacore's dorsal (below, left). It contains 20 to 23 spines that support the sail like battens. In marked contrast to the false albacore's wavy, iridescent markings, black lines streak the bonito's back.

ATLANTIC BONITO

blitzkrieg attacks. Typically, feeding occurs from sunrise into early morning and then again in late afternoon to dusk. Of these two periods, the morning usually offers the better bite, and if I had my choice, I would pick a breezy morn. True, calm days make it easier to spot surface-feeding bonito, but in calm conditions bonito become finicky eaters. Choppy surfaces make them more apt to throw caution to the wind.

Bonito surely must feed deep at times, but, thankfully, they frequently dine topside. Like the false albacore, bonito lack a swim bladder, so they can't suspend on the surface for very long. Expect them to erupt on top and then dive immediately; therefore, casting directly at a busting fish is often as futile as shooting at the tail of a duck—by the time your pattern arrives, the target is gone. Far better to gauge the direction of the fish and then cast slightly ahead or, if you can, get in front of the school and have a fly waiting for them in the water.

Like false albacore, Atlantic bonito "pattern" feed. When there are several schools of bait in an area, bonito are apt to smash through them one by one and then circle back and repeat the whole process. Experienced anglers recognize this pattern and take advantage of it. Instead of chasing the bonito, it's better to sit over a school of bait and wait for the bonito to return. Still, the patterns of Atlantic bonito are not quite as predictable as those of false albacore, so bonito anglers need to be very alert, very observant, and ready to move should the pattern change.

I've often found that blitzing albies are a sign that bonito are in the area. When two predators feed in the same vicinity, the faster and more aggressive of the two controls the action. It is well known, for example, that striped bass frequently feed underneath or behind a pack of ram-paging bluefish. When false albacore and Atlantic bonito feed together, the false albacore quickly dominate the scene. Anglers tend to concentrate on the albies or assume that there are no bonito about. But the bonito are likely nearby. Try fishing for them off to the sides of the main blitz, or sink a fly deep below

it. Better yet, wait until the false albacore move through a spot and then blind cast to that same water.

FORAGE AND FLIES

Bonito dine on invertebrates such as shrimp and squid, but schooling forage fish are their primary sustenance. In northeastern waters, these baitfish are bay anchovies, juvenile menhaden, sand lances, and silversides. These shimmering, translucent morsels run from one to four inches in length, so small epoxy flies in sizes 4 through 1/0 are usually deadly. (Surf Candies are an excellent choice.) As effective as epoxy flies are, plenty of bonito are caught on sparsely tied Lefty's Deceivers in size 1 and 1/0, with the popular colors being white with yellow or chartreuse wings. Dave Skok's Mushroom is another deadly bonito fly, which works fantastically on false albacore, as well. Bonito, though, seem especially partial to streamers tied with rabbit fur, such

as the classic Bonito Bunny. Clouser Deep Minnows and Bob Popovic's Jiggy should be in your bonito box, as well.

When anglers target false albacore and bonito, the prevailing wisdom calls for small flies. Bonito, however, swallow relatively large prey (they are very fond of squid), so don't forget a few long streamers. Five- to six-inch Deceivers and Mushroom mouths come to mind. These bigger flies may prove your ace in the hole, especially for the big bonito in late fall. Although few anglers ever cast them, sliders and poppers are killers at times and often work spectacularly when the fish seem fussy. When fishing sliders in a down-and-across current presentation, making the fly "skate" across the top is often the ticket.

HOOKING THEM, AND HOLDING ON

To my way of thinking, Atlantic bonito offer a greater challenge than false albacore. First, bonito are less abundant, and thus, harder to find. Second, they are also harder to hook well and noticeably harder to stay connected to. False albacore love to slam a fly, hooking themselves in the process, so once they're hooked they are often hooked for good. Bonito both strike and fight differently. Their longer, more slender mouth has less meaty area for the hook to penetrate. To make matters worse, rather than engulf the fly, bonito may simply grasp it between their teeth. Consequently, it is more difficult to get a solid hookup, so be ready for the fact that bonito sometimes get off the hook, even after striking with the same fury as the rest of the Scombrid clan.

The problems that arise because of the bonito's mouth shape and manner of striking can be mitigated by keeping the rod tip down in the water during the retrieve. This angle provides natural resistance against the fish when it hits. Also, get in the habit of setting the hook with the line, not the rod tip. And when the first run ends, set the hook a second time. If you're still consistently dropping fish, try tying your streamers on long-shank hooks, and tie your flies so that the point is well back in the wing. Then bonito are less able to clasp the wing in their maws

FISH OF MANY WATERS

Except to distinguish it from its Pacific cousin, it is something of a misnomer to call *Sarda sarda* the Atlantic bonito. True, these fish predominantly occur in Atlantic waters, roaming both sides of the pond north and south of the equator. Bonito have been reported as far north as Casco Bay, Maine, but are rarely encountered north of Cape Cod. From there, the range extends southward to the Florida coast, although those fish tend to move in small, sporadic schools. This coastal pelagic species is rare in South Florida and in the Keys, but seasonally bonito become somewhat more abundant in northern and central Florida where there is a broader continental shelf. Not surprisingly, considering the temperature ranges they prefer, Atlantic bonito occur in the Gulf of Mexico, as well, particularly in the waters off the Florida panhandle.

Although it isn't known if separate migrations occur in the Southern Hemisphere, bonito are caught off the Venezuelan coast, and they move along the South American coast all the way to Buenos Aires, Argentina. On the opposite side of the ocean, *Sarda sarda* are harvested from the tip of South Africa clear to Liberia to Senegal. They also enter the Mediterranean, Black, Adriatic, and Baltic Seas, and they occasionally wind up on Irishman's plate fried with chips.

—Ed Mitchell



Bonito blitzes are more sporadic and erupt in less predictable patterns than false albacore blitzes. Even when you snap shoot, lead your target.

TIM LEARY

without the hook point ramming home. Finally, if the fish refuse the fly or the strikes seem soft, increase your retrieve rate and force the fish to commit to the fly.

Unlike false albacore, which fight in a fairly predictable manner, bonito make evasive maneuvers. Initially, they make light-speed runs straight away, then break into sudden and erratic changes in speed and direction. Sometimes they stop in their tracks and shake their heads wickedly. Fighting them only becomes more difficult near the boat. Expect each fish to dive under the hull, and just when you've worked around to the opposite gunwale, they like to dive back the other way, forcing you to circumnavigate the hull again. In every facet of the hunt, successful bonito anglers must think and move with agility.

TACKLE TIPS

Bonito rarely weigh over 10 pounds, so an 8-weight usually suffices, but be sure you have plenty of backing and a good drag on your reel. I depend mainly on two fly lines: a clear intermediate for situations

where bonito are regularly showing on top, and a fast-sinking line for fishing in strong currents or under blitzing albies. In the leader department, I prefer a 9-footer tapered to 12-pound test on the intermediate line and a 5- or 6-foot leader on the sinking line. These I build from clear, high-quality mono, and I construct them using a single brand of material throughout. Mixing brands can, in my opinion, lead to poor knot strength. I have yet to convert to fluorocarbon, and while it has its advantages in terms of strength, abrasion-resistance, and transparency, I find that it doesn't knot well to monofilament.

Bonito can bite you off, but most bonito anglers do not use a wire bite tippet for two reasons: first, they feel wire reduces the number of strikes, and second, you don't get bitten off all that often. I was, however, cut off twice in the same day last season, so this year I'm going to use a bite tippet made from the latest generation of braided, stainless-steel wire. Marketed under the names Tyger Wire and Surflon Micro Supreme, this wire is flexible and accepts conventional knots,

although you must be extra careful forming them and drawing them tight. I used this material last fall while fishing for blues and accidentally caught a false albacore, so I already have some faith in it.

ABUNDANCE

In my part of the coast, bonito appear to be less abundant today than they were 10 years ago. Still appearances can be deceiving. During this period of apparent decline, the number of false albacore numbers has generally risen, and it could well be that their abundance has to an extent made finding bonito more difficult. It could also be that bonito, like many marine species, go through periods of boom and bust. But if bonito numbers are down, consider this—female bonito can carry anywhere from 700,000 to 3 million eggs. With that kind of fecundity, the bonito population could explode without warning. Wouldn't that be nice!



Ed Mitchell is the author of several books, including Fly Fishing the Saltwater Shoreline and Fly Rodding the Coast.