

CHAPTER 19 - SPECIAL TROLLING SECTION

My 3 Favorite Trolling Spreads

for scoring
with tuna, wahoo
and dolphin.



Diving birds and busting skipjacks off the north end of Bimini drew fishermen from all directions. We were the third boat to arrive, and quickly set a spread of ballyhoo for yellowfin tuna, which often feed among the skippies.

After a few uneventful passes, it was obvious that the yellowfins weren't interested in our ballyhoo, so we switched to small jethead lures. On the very next pass, the center rod doubled over. We had cracked the code, and soon had our first tuna chilling in the fishbox!

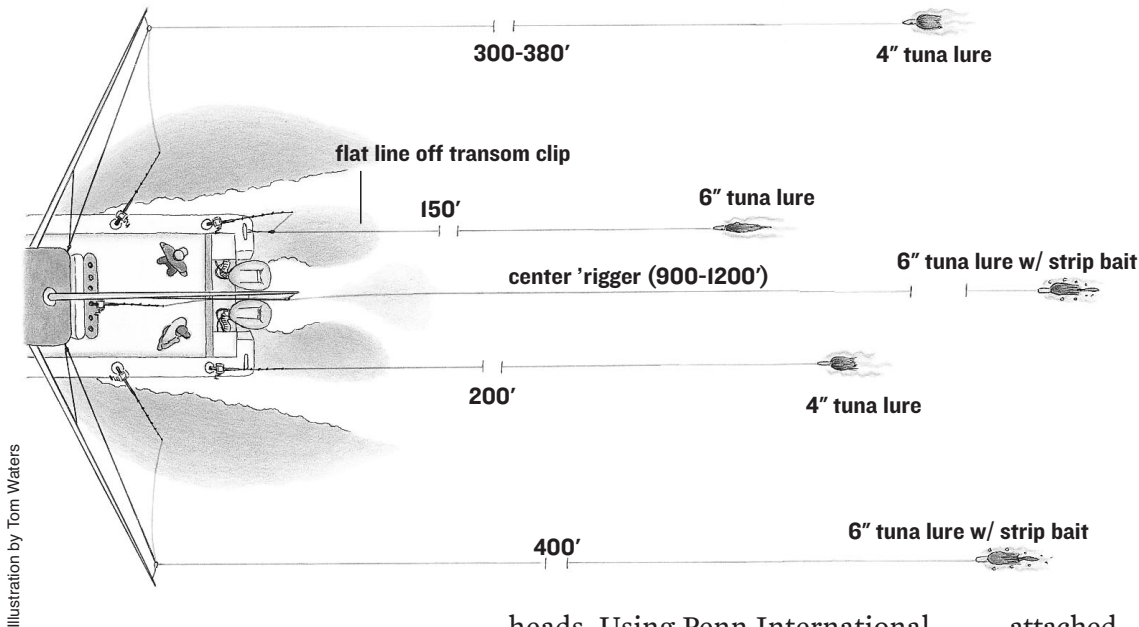
As that catch proved, successful offshore trolling often requires experience and adaptability. You've got to read the signs that lead to fish and be ready to alter your game plan if strikes are not forthcoming. Changing lures, varying your trolling speed, and changing lure position are three things you can do to produce a bite, but having a few proven trolling spreads up your

sleeve also helps considerably.

Outlined in the following pages are my three favorite spreads, the ones I rely on to catch fish aboard my center console, *MARC VI*. It should be noted that the spreads often serve as a starting point, and that I'll often change things around in terms of bait type, placement and trolling speed.



Tuna Time Spread (5 to 10 knots)



PLACEMENT

Because tuna have incredible eyesight, I'll rig each lure on eight feet of 80-pound-test Seaguar fluorocarbon. For the plain lures, I simply add enough spacer beads to position the single 6/0 long-shank, ring-eye hook just inside the skirt. For those carrying the bonito strips, it's necessary to form a pin after securing the hook to the leader, to which the bonito strip is

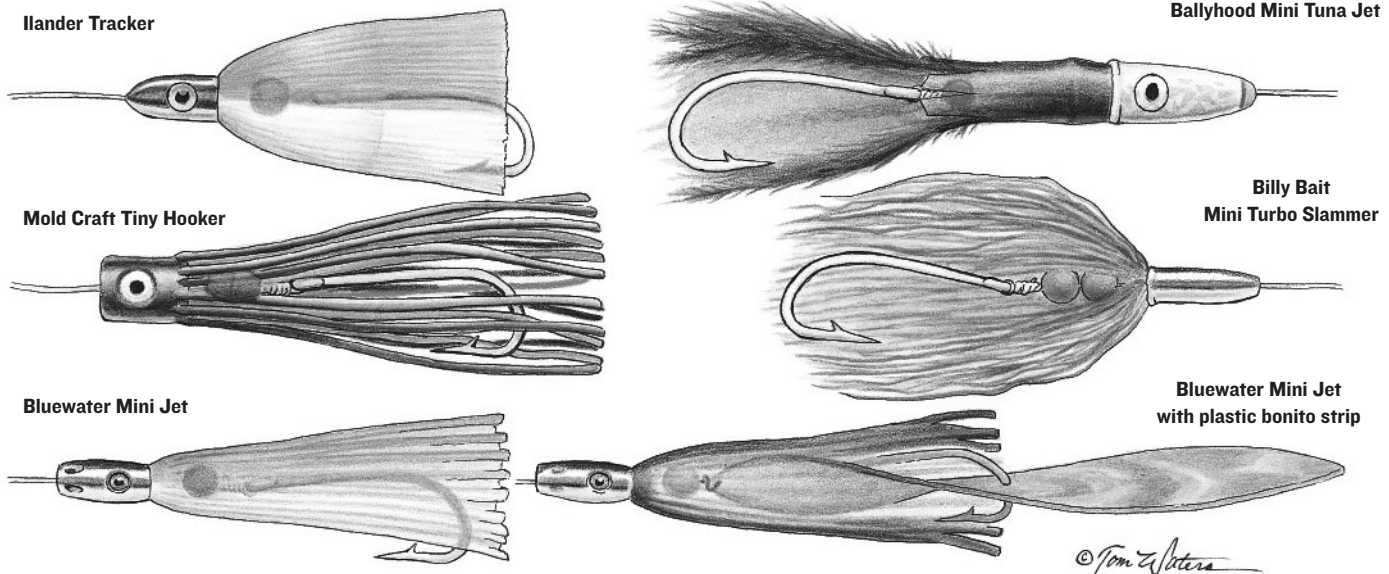
Yellowfins, and to some degree blackfins, are a prized catch when I head to the Bahamas. Catching tuna in these waters requires a special spread.

TACKLE Like that yellowfin we plucked from a school of skipjacks off Bimini, our "go to" tuna spread is based on small to medium jet-

heads. Using Penn International 30s, we'll troll five jetheads measuring between four and six inches long. The exact brands and models include the Ilander Tracker, Bluewater Mini Jet, Ballyhood, Billy Bait Mini Turbo Slammer and Mold Craft Tiny Hooker. We'll fish most of the lures "plain" and some with plastic bonito strips.

attached.

When they're feeding aggressively, tuna will eat just about any bait. However, when the fishing is tough, I'll troll the baits far behind the boat. For example, my two flat lines are fished roughly 100 to 200 feet behind the boat. I'll often experiment by running the short flat-line bait from a transom clip, which keeps the line



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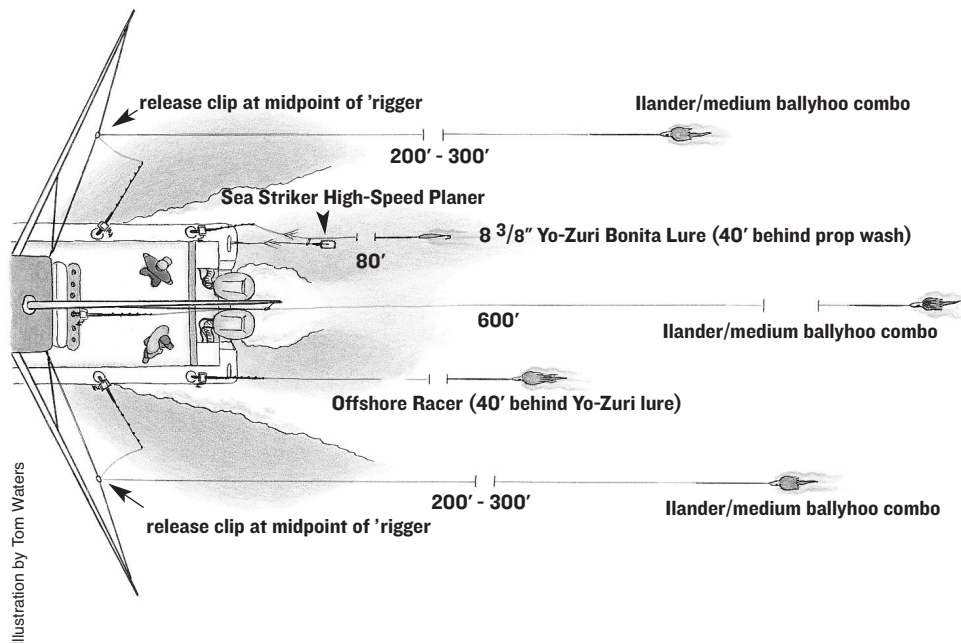
low to the water and the lure beneath the surface, or off a high-speed planer. The long flat line is fished straight back.

The outrigger lures, one with a strip and one plain, are run some 300 to 400 feet back. The center-'rigger bait, one of the hot lines for tuna, is positioned some 300 to 400 yards back. Granted, it's a pain to check or remove weeds from this bait, but sooner or later it will get nailed by a tuna.

SPEED Productive trolling speeds range from five to ten knots. One tip for dialing in your trolling speed includes watching the tuna carefully. If they're busting small flying fish, pick up the speed to where the lures are just skipping across the surface. Imitate the action of the flyers and you just might get more strikes. The size of the forage is equally important. If the tuna appear to be busting small flyers or tiny fish, dispatch your smallest lures. If they're chasing large flying fish, step up in size, or at least add one or two larger lures to your mix. One good way to determine the size of your lures is to gut the first tuna you catch. Its stomach contents will tell you plenty about the size of the local forage.

TECHNIQUE Finally, try to get well ahead of the tuna prior to cutting in front of them, so that your far lures will intercept the leading edge of the school. If you get a strike, keep the boat moving along at the same trolling speed for about 30 seconds. Doing so will help remove stretch from the line and result in a solid hook-up. It'll also keep your other baits "in play" for any followers. That's how you get those double- and triple-headers, and create that chaos in the cockpit that we all live for!

Super Wahoo Spread (6 to 10 knots)



TACKLE When the target is wahoo, my spread consists of three medium ballyhoo rigged behind Ilander lures. Each bait is rigged with eight feet of 80-pound, single-strand wire leader and a single 8/0, long-shank, needle-eye hook. Securing the hook to the leader requires a half dozen haywire twists followed by a few barrel wraps. However, I make between 15 and 20 haywire twists prior to the barrel wrap. This gives me another inch or two between the hook eye and leader pin (the tag end of barrel wrap) so I can position the hook farther back in the ballyhoo. Depending on the number of haywire twists I make, I can easily place a hook in the mid-section or even the rear quarter of the ballyhoo to foil short-striking fish.

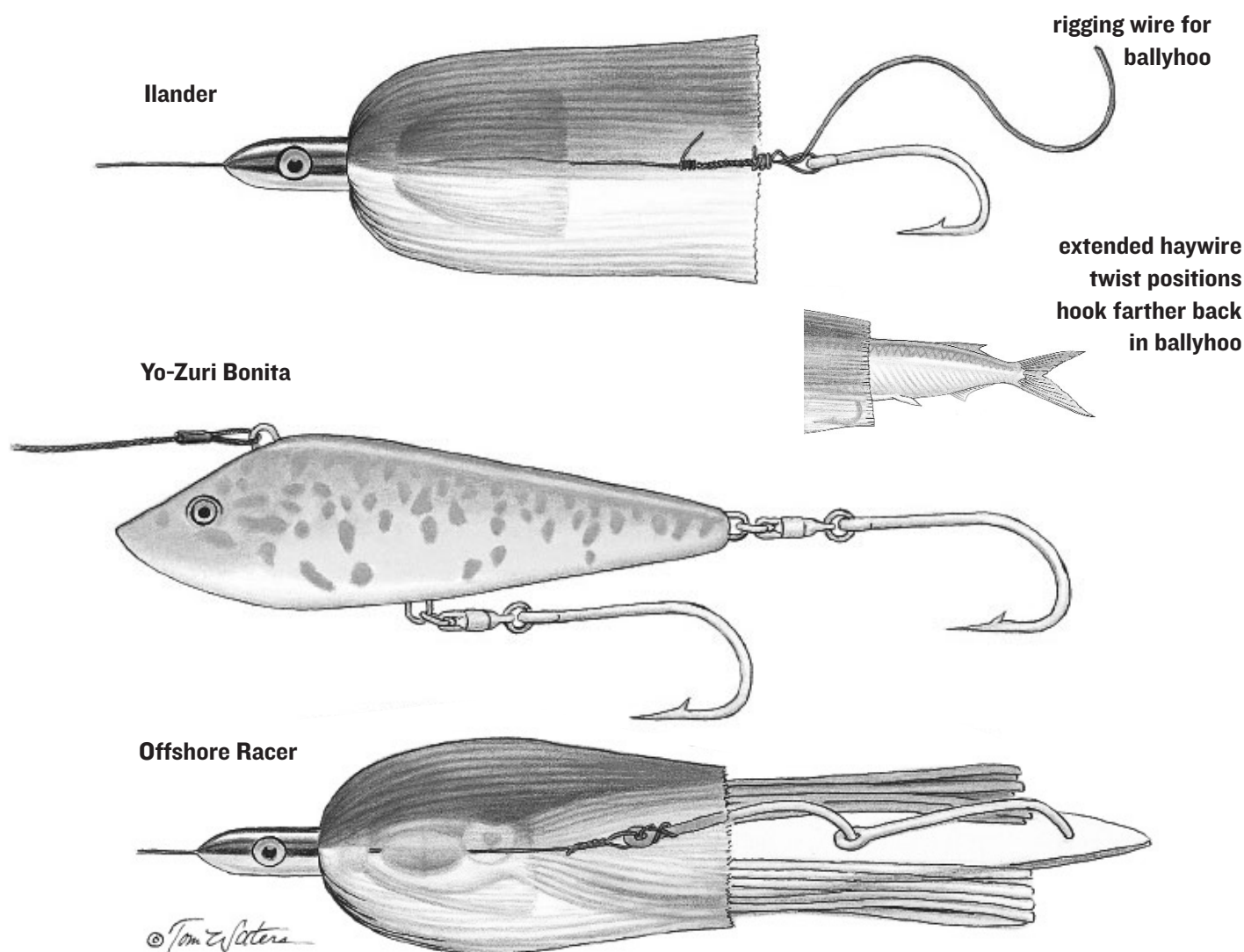
I use all-blue or blue-and-white Ilanders that, when paired with a ballyhoo, mimic a flying

fish. The exception is the center 'rigger, where I opt for either a green/yellow or pink/black Ilander.

PLACEMENT

The Ilander/bally combos are fished from the outriggers and the center 'rigger. To reduce the line angle, as well as the amount of dropback, I run the outrigger clips halfway up the poles. I also adjust the tension settings on them so that there's enough resistance to set the hook on the strike.

At roughly 200 to 300 feet behind the boat, the outrigger baits are fished farther back than in my dolphin spread. The center-'rigger bait swims around 200 yards back. The extra distance keeps these baits racing along at or just beneath the surface at trolling speeds of between six and ten knots. All are fished from Penn International 30s.



My long flat line is an 8 ³/₈" Yo-Zuri Bonita lure in either a dolphin pattern (if dolphins are around) or a black/purple pattern (if skipjack, tuna or bonito are present). The lure is positioned roughly 40 feet behind the point where the prop wash fades to clean water. Using a No. 64 rubber band and a two-way swivel, I attach this line to a Sea Striker HS8 High-Speed Planer.

TECHNIQUE

The planer, which can be trolled at speeds approaching 15 knots, comes complete with an independ-

ent tow line that attaches to a transom cleat, double swivels and rubber bands. It takes the Yo-Zuri Bonita down roughly eight feet. On the strike, the rubber band sets the hook as it breaks, letting us fight the fish free of the planer system. The Bonita lure, incidentally, is rigged with ten feet of 175-pound, 49-strand cable and fished from a Penn International 50 and matching Tuna Stick rod.

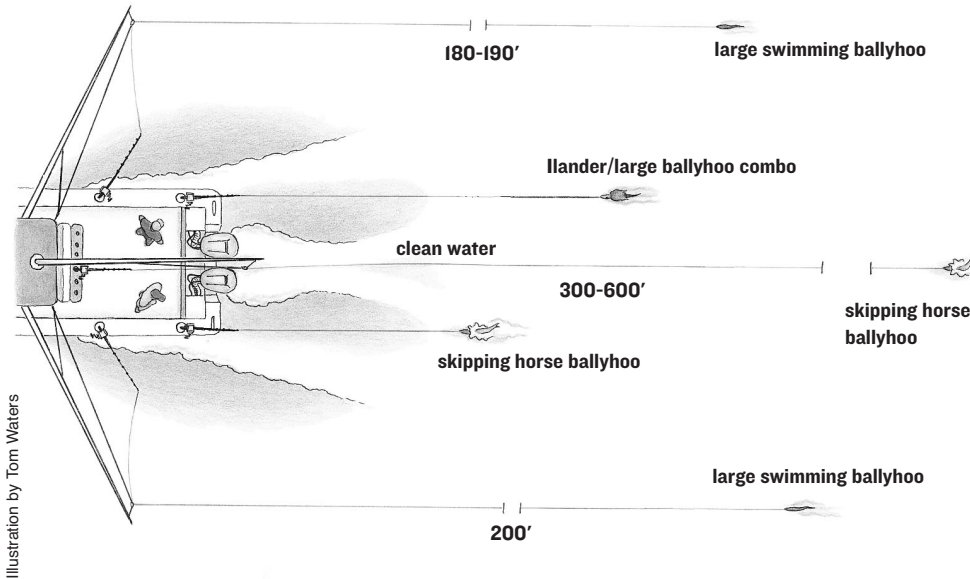
The long flat line tows an Offshore Racer lure/bait-strip combo. I position this bait roughly

30 to 40 feet behind the Yo-Zuri Bonita and fish it off another International 50, minus the planer. With a mix of large and medium baits, this spread has proven itself on wahoo of all sizes. Important tips include keeping the baits racing along just beneath the surface and dropping them farther back if they start skipping.

Wahoo run in schools, so when you get a strike, hit the Man Overboard button on your GPS. Troll back over that spot and you just may score again.

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Trophy Dolphin Spread (5 to 7 knots)



Dolphin are one of my favorite game fish to pursue on the troll. Since I'd much rather catch a single 30-pound fish than 15 schoolies, my spread is built around large and horse ballyhoo. By trolling these big baits, I'm less likely to draw the attention of school dolphin. This keeps my baits in play longer, increasing the chances of hooking a larger fish.

TACKLE My dolphin arsenal consists of three Penn International 30s and two International 20s on matching Penn Tuna Stick rods. The 20s are fished off the outriggers, whereas the 30s are fished off the center 'rigger and the flat lines. I tie a short Bimini twist in each line and add a 165-pound-test, chrome, ball-bearing snap swivel to the double line. With the exception of the long flat-line bait, which is rigged on eight feet of 80-pound, single-strand wire, all leaders are approximately eight feet of either 80 or 130-pound Seaguar fluorocarbon (I use the former in Florida waters, the latter in the Bahamas)

and carry single, 8/0 long-shank, ring-eye hooks.

PLACEMENT I opt for a mix of swimming and skipping ballyhoo, minus skirts or lure heads. The swimming ballyhoo are generally fished from the outriggers and placed far enough back to keep them swimming just beneath the surface. I'll also stagger their placement by about 15 feet or so. The outrigger baits track

approximately 180 to 250 feet behind the boat. The center 'rigger has a plain skipping ballyhoo positioned some 300 to 600 feet (100 to 200 yards) behind the boat.

A skipping ballyhoo is run from the short flat line and positioned right where the prop wash begins to fade to clean water. The long flat-line bait — an all-blue or blue-and-white Ilander/ ballyhoo combo rigged with a wire leader and single 8/0 long-shank, needle-eye hook — runs 40 to 60 feet behind the short flat-line bait. This bait is rigged with wire because it attracts wahoo.

TECHNIQUE Trolling speeds run between five and seven knots. The key is to make sure the skipping baits are barely splashing on the surface, while the swimming baits are working their magic just below. Adjustments include either increasing or decreasing the trolling speed and/or dropping back or moving the baits forward to keep them performing their best.

