

RAINY SEASON BLUES

TAGGING ALONG ON A GUY HARVEY DOCUMENTARY SHOOT IN PANAMA

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TROPIC STAR LODGE IN PIÑAS BAY, PANAMA, IS UNDOUBTEDLY ONE THE BEST PLACES TO CATCH BLACK AND BLUE MARLIN IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE. A TWO-HOUR FLIGHT FROM MIAMI GETS YOU TO PANAMA, AND ANOTHER 45-MINUTE HOP LANDS YOU AT A FIVE-STAR HOTEL SMACK-DAB IN THE MIDDLE OF THE JUNGLE. WHILE ALMOST EVERYONE KNOWS THAT THE BEST TIME FOR MARLIN IN PANAMA IS FROM DECEMBER THROUGH FEBRUARY, THERE'S A STRONG RUN OF BLUES IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER DURING CENTRAL AMERICA'S RAINY SEASON THAT HARDLY ANYONE MENTIONS.

During this time frame, you can expect to catch four blues to every black (both averaging around 400 pounds), along with a bunch of tuna in the 100-pound range. Swarms of 40-pound-plus dolphin also show up at this time and are considered pests! With all this activity, you could understand why, when artist and conservationist Guy Harvey suggested that I join him at Tropic Star while he shot a documentary on marlin, I jumped at the chance.

An international figure in both art and conservation circles, Harvey established the Guy Harvey Research Institute at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, with the goals of fostering scientific research for the effective management of the world's marine fisheries and their ecosystems, and also educating the public and government officials on the need for protection of marine environments for generations to come.

Harvey had already completed documentaries on tiger sharks and spawning Nassau grouper — marlin was the next species on his list. We planned to catch as many marlin as possible, put satellite tags on the blues, and record everything from both above and below the water. Producer George Schellenger and videographer Rick Westphal, both veterans of Guy Harvey shoots, joined us on the trip, and we all arrived at Tropic Star, loaded down with more photography and editing equipment than any sane person would want to imagine — but we still had to pull on some marlin to make the trip come together.

Every day at Tropic Star begins with catching bait. Bait consists of anything in the bonito/tuna family that can be enticed to strike a small, feathered hook. Trolling high-speed plastics also works well at times, but slow-trolling a live bonito on





50-pound stand-up tackle is the preferred tactic. On our first day, we hooked a nice black marlin that put on a spectacular jumping display on the leader, but the hook pulled a bit prematurely. It was a good start, but the fish's escape turned out to be a bit of an omen. The next morning, the only baits we could drag up were skipjack tuna weighing around 15 pounds. We were lucky if even their heads fit in the tuna tubes, so we pretty much put them back out on 20/0 circle hooks as soon as they came in the boat.

Our first live bait might have been swimming for just about 10 minutes when a small (250-pound) blue sucked it in and took off for the horizon. Black marlin just may be the most spectacularly photogenic fish imaginable, but blue marlin are way down at the opposite end of the list. Blues possess awesome power and speed, and usually jump like crazy when hooked, but then they greyhound away, throwing up about the same amount of spray as a personal watercraft. All your still camera records is a mountain of spray with a tail sticking out of it. They put on an impressive series of jumps, but it's always about 300 yards behind the boat and way out of the range of my 70-200 mm lens. Once you catch up and get some drag on them, they then proceed to sound, and when you finally pump them back to the surface, they are brown, exhausted, lying on their side, waiting to be unhooked. Unfortunately, we never even got that far with our first strike — it threw the hook on the first jump.

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Within minutes, we already had a second bait in the water and were in the middle of sending out a third when we got another marlin bite. Harvey's daughter, Jessica, fought the blue for 15 minutes or so, but it too spit the hook. We'd lost two blue marlin before 8:30 a.m. — and never saw another one for the rest of the day. We did manage to find a pod of dolphin and yellowfin tuna slamming a baitball — which resulted in around 300 pounds of prime sushi and some amazing underwater footage.

Harvey, by the way, is an accomplished diver, as are the rest of his crew. They brought along three underwater video cameras and a half-dozen GoPro cameras, including one that was trolled in front of the short bait in a housing they referred to as “Morris.” That setup actually caught the first marlin that ran



down the live bonito, and later in the week, another blue tried to eat it again. These cameras were able to capture some of the incredible underwater shots that are an integral part of all of Harvey's documentaries.

The old cliché you often hear about marlin fishing is that it is hours of boredom interrupted by seconds of chaos. It's even worse when trying to film them. Everyone must be ready at all times, which means your camera has to be in your hand — always. Most of the day, Harvey would sit on the gunwale in a full wetsuit and scuba tank, ready to hop over the side when a marlin appeared in the spread. Sitting around in a wetsuit for eight hours a day on the deck of a sport boat in Panama might be one of the greatest weight-loss methods ever discovered.



Day Three dawned with a grim reminder of why they call the summer the rainy season. We managed to hook a nice blue before the squalls caught us, only to have it break the 400-pound-test mono leader. It's something that almost never happens, unless

you have four cameras focused on the fish.

The next day, another boat fishing next to us hooked a beautiful black marlin that gave us an impressive aerial display on the leader, providing some excellent video and still photos. We hooked up another nice blue, only to have something hit the 50-pound mono and cut the line. The next day, the marlin went on strike, and no one in the fleet caught fish. The first rule in marlin fishing, however, is patience. At this point, we were scoring a dismal 2-for-13 and our mental state was bordering on psychotic, but as they say, that's fishing.

Fortunately, our last day proved to be the lucky one — we caught three blue marlin, and all of them swam away with satellite tags. The film crew also enjoyed another swim session with the dolphin and big yellow-fin working baitballs. And they ended up amassing hours of video footage and interviews that will form the bulk of Harvey's marlin documentary.

The satellite tags will trace each marlin's travels for almost a year, providing crucial information on the life and journeys of these magnificent creatures for the Guy Harvey Research Institute. Hopefully, the week we spent at Tropic Star will help bring the importance of marlin preservation to the attention of individuals who can actually do something about it. It was an honor to be part of the operation, but I can't wait to get back to Tropic Star to do some fishing myself.

