

PANAMA'S TROPHY TRIFECTA

Feature & Photos by Bill DePriest



Have you ever had a 150-pound tuna chased to the surface by a 600-pound blue marlin? Hounded so hard that the tuna leaped from the water like a billfish – not once, but three times? To tell you the truth, I'd never seen that – before my last trip to Panama in December. I know people have had small tuna eaten off the hook by marlin, but a 150-pounder? This marlin's eyes were much larger than its mouth. I don't even think a 600-pound marlin could eat a 150-pound tuna; a grander, but not a 600-pounder. Seems every trip I take to Tropic Star Lodge, something really special happens.



After making several jumps on leader, this trophy yellowfin was finally subdued.

Before we arrived Panama had been facing some of its most torrential rains in history. Six straight days of gnarly rain left both the offshore and inshore conditions in poor shape. But the great thing about Tropic Star Lodge is that the conditions change so quickly. As they say down there, "Green today, blue tomorrow." By the second day the offshore scene had cleaned up, and the marlin really began to bite.

Winds were up just a bit, giving these marlin a reason to come up and flash us some tail. Radio silence was soon snuffed out by a captain stating that he was hooked up. Five minutes later, he popped on again to say he was on a double. While they were fighting a blue, a black came tailing by, and they hooked him on a live bait as well. From there the marlin bite got fast and furious, with some boats releasing as many as three for the day. One boat had a blue that went over the 600 mark that day. With the marlin really starting to bite, we were pumped for the week.

On the third day my friend Scott had an early shot at a 350-pound blue marlin – his first ever – which he released in short

order. Then we found a school of the right kind of dolphin, and Boobie birds were hitting the water like a scene out of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Since we were running low on big baits, we dropped out a cedar plug, hoping for a small yellowfin. Soon, we were rewarded with a 40-pounder – just a bit too big for bait – so we put out two of our five-pound bonito and made a pass in the school.

Our first pass with the cedar plug, we could see 60- to 100-pound tuna swimming in the waves like the dolphin – just plain awesome. Thirty seconds into our first pass with the big baits, the port corner exploded, and my dad was on. The fish pulled drag steadily but didn't really know he was hooked. Five minutes into the playing-possum game, that changed, and she started burning drag big time. Soon, she settled in, and we knew it was a nice one. Fifteen minutes into the fight, the fish got real squirrely, darting to and fro, racing to the surface and then sounding quickly, sort of like when you first hook a good tuna and it hasn't settled in yet. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the tuna was airborne like a



FLY-FISHING THE LODGE

My G Loomis CrossCurrent rod and Abel Super 13 reel went with me on this trip. I called and ordered some billfish/dorado/tuna flies from Cam Sigler, the most well known producer of quality big game saltwater flies in the world.

While trolling live baits for marlin, dorado often appear in the spread and will readily take a fly, and we had great luck getting them to take the Cam Sigler flies. Heck – even my dad caught one on the fly rod.

During the May-June timeframe, the sailfish can be so thick that getting multiples on fly rods is not unlikely. Most months also give you a good shot at marlin and big tuna, so next time you head down, grab a few of Cam's flies (www.camsigler.com) and your fly outfit, and give it a whirl. ■

striking marlin, and not just poking its head out of the water – I mean full-blown greyhounding jumps. This went on for another two glamorous jumps. The guys stood there scratching their heads while I ran for my camera.

Just as my fingertips touched the grip on my camera, I heard another reel screaming out line. Scott ran up to the starboard rod and came tight. Behind the boat, water erupted as a 600-pound blue marlin broke the surface, as if he were being introduced at a wrestling match and needed to make a showy entrance. That fish must have chased the tuna to the point of leaping into the air to flee. A double-header of huge tuna and monster marlin is not very common. Matter of fact, I've never been on a boat that had that combo before.

Thanks to Captain Gustavo's magical boat work, we were able to release the 600-pound marlin, but not before it performed a spectacular boat-side acrobatics show – one of the best I've ever witnessed from a blue. Then we were ready to focus on my dad's tuna, and the team made short work of the 150-pound beast. Even on leader, the tuna jumped two more times. I guess his

memory of being chased by a huge billfish didn't fade that quickly!

One more goal remained: Scott had never caught a tuna over 35 pounds. Luckily, we still had one half-dead bonito left, so we raced back to the school and dropped out our poor excuse for bait. Before the deckhand could even get the bait in the rigger clip, a monster tuna clobbered it. Scott jumped on the rod and settled in for one of the toughest tuna battles I've seen.

The fish just did not want to come to the boat. Scott whined for water, and I got to enjoy the show from the lens of my camera. Seeing someone accomplish his goal of catching a personal-best of a particular species is just awesome. After the tug-of-war of Scott's life, they hoisted his beautiful 150-pound yellowfin onto the deck. Two blue marlin and two nice tuna; what a way to end the day! Definitely one of my most memorable and special fishing days.

Choosing to take it easy the next day, we ran up the coast to Gustavo's favorite wahoo spot, near a village named Playa de Muerto, where a young Indian boy on a kayak met us as we arrived. Gustavo yelled out, "Wahoo!" and the

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The yellowfin twins. The one on the left narrowly escaped becoming a 600-pound marlin's next meal. An afternoon snack? I don't think so.

boy nodded yes and pointed up the coast a bit. Engines roared again, and we raced to a spot just around the bend.

I laid out my bk/purple and bk/silver Yo-zuri Hydro Mags, and before I could grab the camera, the bk/purple was already singing. Those rocket-fast short bursts are just amazing. My dad jumped on the rod and made short work of a really nice 65-pound wahoo. We set the Yo-zuris out again. Wham! A nice 30-pound wahoo for myself as well. Third time was a charm, and Scott landed his first wahoo, too.

We decided to stay in tight and troll for a variety, and that we did, catching tons of huge sierra, small yellowfin tuna, and a really large version of our Pacific bonito. Although the conditions were not right for the roosterfish, we sure had a great inshore day.

On our way home, we stopped by the village to drop off a few sierra – payback to the kid for the wahoo tip!

Our mission for the final day was to get dad on some billfish. Huge improvements in water color on the Zane Grey Reef prompted Gustavo to start us out right there where we make bait. Two baits went in the water, and in short order



Scott's estimated-600-pound blue marlin greyhounds for glory off of Piñas Bay, Panama.

An advertisement for Okuma Andros fishing reels. The top half features a large, detailed image of a yellowfin tuna fish swimming in clear blue water. Below the fish, the text reads: "Braided line changed the game. Thinner, stronger and more responsive, it's time for a reel to showcase what's possible." Below this, in large, bold, white letters, is "THE FUTURE FITS IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND." followed by "THE NEXT EVOLUTION OF THE TWO-SPEED." At the bottom, there is an image of an Okuma Andros 511 fishing reel and a fishing rod. The text below the gear says: "Cut from aluminum and stainless steel and holding more than 400-yards of 50lb braid, the Andros 511 delivers more reel than you've ever thought possible. Pair with an Andros rod, and experience more from every fish." The Okuma logo and website "okumafishing.com" are also present. A QR code is located in the bottom right corner.

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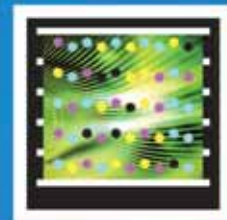
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a small blue inhaled the port rigger bait. No sooner had my dad jumped into the chair than we had the fish boat-side for the release. Not five minutes into our first troll of the day and we'd already released a marlin. Most other boats were just finishing up catching baits.

Gustavo ran us back to the spot and then set a rigged dead sierra down the middle. Before he was able to set out the other two rods, a beautiful black marlin snapped up the sierra, and my dad was back in the chair, doing what he does best – whooping fish! A beautiful show and a clean release left us with two flags up only an hour into the day. What a week!

Tropic Star Lodge saw 22 black marlin and 30 blues released for the week. One private boat fishing right by us actually hooked what they estimated was definitely over the grander mark. They had him within 20 feet of the leader a couple times. While backing down-swell, they lost the prime in the water pump, the alarms sounded, and they were forced to choose the engines over their grander. She broke off shortly after they shut the engines off and buttoned the drag – a real shame.

That's the kind of stuff that happens when you travel to the Mecca of fishing.

TRIP PLANNER:

3 Trips and 3 Great Experiences at 3 Different Times of the Year

Here's a rough guide for planning your trip to the Lodge:

We always take the Copa Airlines direct flight from LAX, which puts you on the ground in Panama by 10:00 a.m. Once you hit the airport, their Royal Saloon Team greets you and shuffles you through customs so there's no waiting around. They take you up to the private lounge for a drink and some relaxation while they get your luggage and load it into the car. Then we check in at the Sheraton Panama Hotel & Convention Center (www.sheraton-panama.com), a very nice "American-ized" hotel with luxurious rooms and great food.

After a short flight into the jungle, you are at the Lodge, relaxing in the most outrageously beautiful rainforest in the world. It really reminds me of something you only see on the National Geographic Channel.

Rooms are comfortable and spacious, and you have the option of booking the recently renovated "Palace," which was the original owners' home atop the hill. Let's just say that it's extremely high end accommodations, and you'll live like a billionaire oil tycoon for the week. Who else offers Please see **Tropic Star** on page 76

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TROPIC STAR from page 30 | that? You will be fishing on one of their 15 comfortable and fast customized 31-foot Bertrams. Visit www.tropicstar.com and check it out.

There's no bad time to visit the Lodge so much as there's a season to fit anyone's aspirations.

July through September

My first expedition to Tropic Star Lodge was in August of 2005, during what they used to call their "slow season."

It was my first time to Panama, and I was a bit shy in the traveling department. The first thing I figured out was that in Panama I was as safe or safer there than I am at home. Also, I learned right off the bat that the Panamanian people love Americans; remember, we are the ones who built the canal that gave tons of jobs and made the economy go strong for Panama. Don't be surprised if a cab driver thanks you for visiting his country (as ours did).

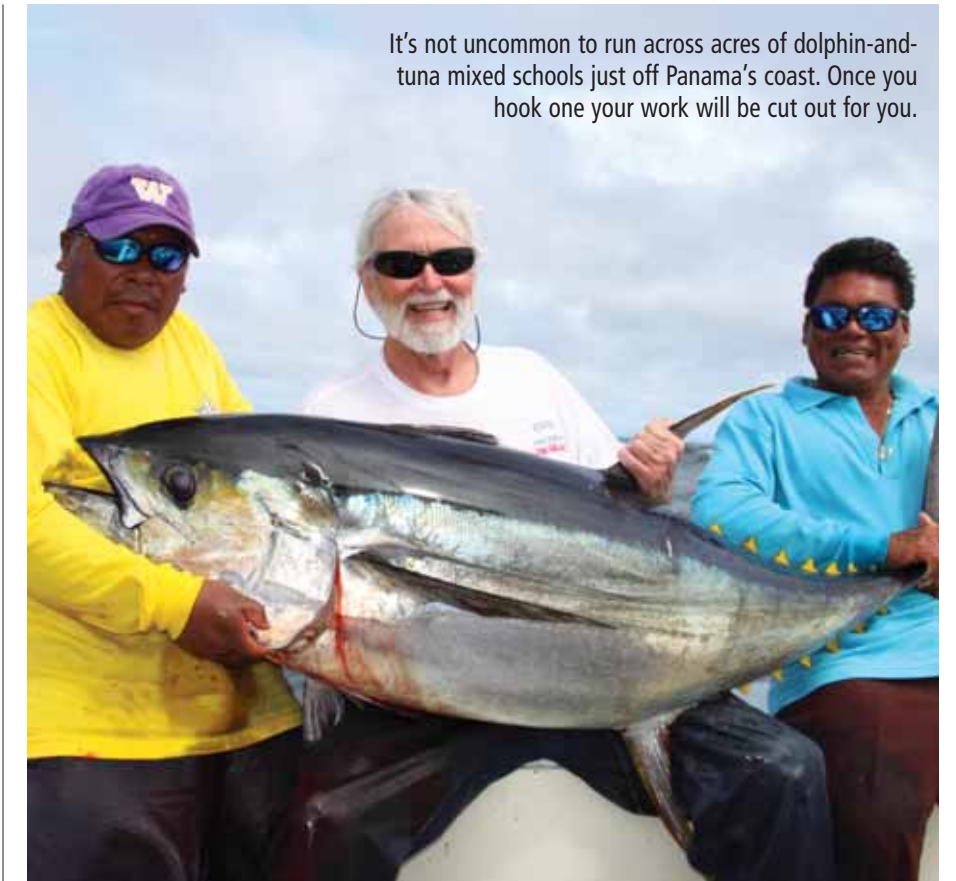
August and September have been seeing some of the best blue marlin and giant yellowfin tuna fishing the Lodge has ever seen in any month. One September day last year, they had 30

mixed marlin out of 47 bites for only nine boats – record-setting, to say the least.

Years ago, the Lodge wasn't open for as much of the year as it is now, leaving this time period undiscovered. Then several years ago, the boats started looking farther offshore and found that the big tuna and blue marlin stack up there at this time. Since they'd usually spent the majority of the time fishing the reef for blacks, they'd no clue that the drop-off, which is only 15 miles or so out, was holding so many trophy fish. We caught blue marlin up to 600 pounds or so, black marlin to 400, and we saw tuna well over the 200-pound mark landed.

Inshore fishing is really good at this time, too. When we were there, unfortunately, we were focused on offshore, but we heard the stories of the big roosters and snappers from the other guests.

After spending time at the Lodge, I'd have to say that for the offshore fishing scene as well as variety, I really place this time of year high up on my list. And from what I've heard, this time of year is starting to become a favorite among regulars.



It's not uncommon to run across acres of dolphin-and-tuna mixed schools just off Panama's coast. Once you hook one your work will be cut out for you.

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Scott poses with a nice skinny taken while trolling a Yo-zuri Hydro-Mag plug at eight knots right along the coast.

April through June

Our next trip was during May, and we were really excited to see large quantities of sailfish roaming these waters, following the sardines into the shallows. In all my anticipation to the sailfish bite, I looked right past the inshore fishing. During our first trip, we'd really focused on catching marlin and did not spend any time looking inshore – a big mistake. In the back of my head, I kept hearing Raleigh Werking of the Lodge telling me about the great inshore fishing this time of year.

Halfway through the first day, and we'd already released tons of sailfish. They were everywhere. Every time we started the boat, we raised two or three at a time. By the time we had gotten the photos we needed, the guys were ready to go check out this inshore fishing Raleigh had been boasting about.

And I'm so thankful that I listened to him. We spent most of the rest of our trip inshore, pulling on the largest roosterfish I have ever seen as well as some really nice snapper. I would say that the inshore fishing at Tropic Star Lodge during this time period is the best I have ever witnessed anywhere in the world.

If you decide to try this time of the year (and I highly recommend you do), spend time inshore. Sailfish are great, and there are always some tuna and marlin offshore, but what you will experience inshore may change your opinion of inshore fishing forever. Also, when your captain puts out a seven-pound skipjack on the downrigger while fishing for roosters, don't look at him like he's nuts, like I did. Fishing at Tropic Star, there isn't a bait fish too big. I even heard of

one captain catching a huge rooster on a small yellowfin tuna for bait. Talk about cock-a-doodle-doo!

December through March

I can't think of anywhere in the world where the black marlin stack up so tightly and so consistently just offshore. Now's a great opportunity to chase that dream of catching one because it's the time of year when the blacks start making their way onto the reef and the first drop-off, not to mention there are also some wahoo around up the coast (though the inshore scene had not yet fully recovered from the heavy rains on our trip). Typically, inshore action can also be a good, with lots of big almaco jacks around.

Winds can come in a bit, but it typically doesn't get too rough any time off the waters of Piñas Bay. The great part is that this is the time of year when the marlin are closest to the Lodge, making the run a short 20-minute ride to the reef. I always figured that the reef was for black marlin only, but there were blues there as well, and the week after we left, the blues were thick on the reef, battling the blacks for baits.



A 600-pound blue marlin brings Scott to his knees while dad takes it easy in the chair while battling a 150-pound tuna.

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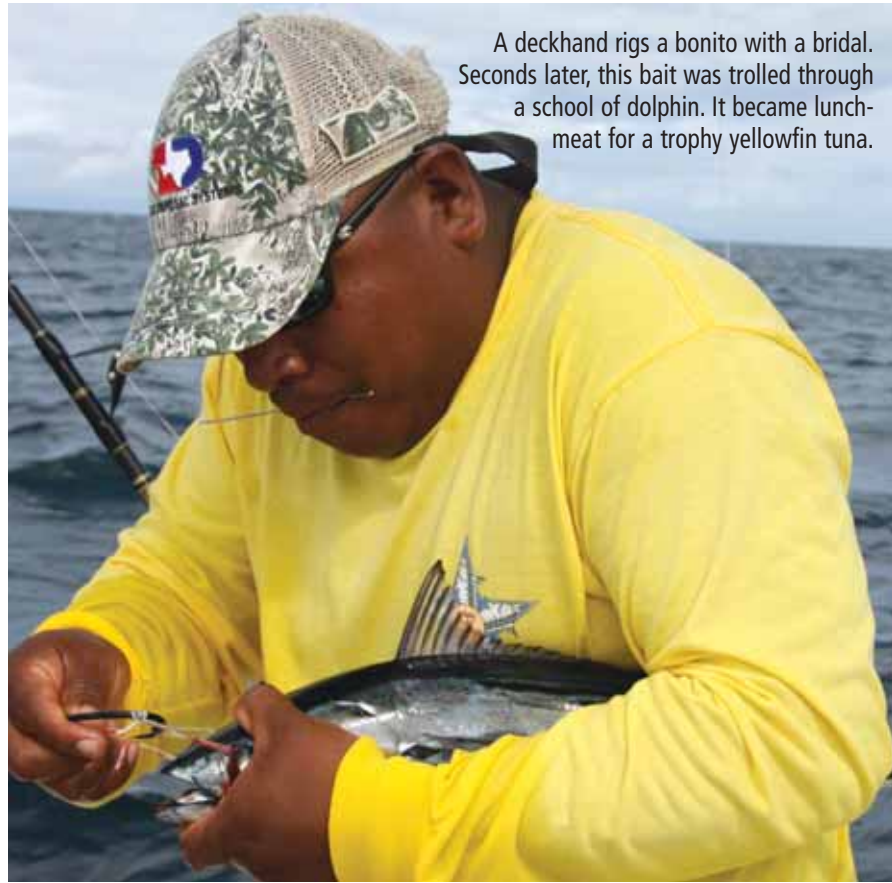
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A deckhand rigs a bonito with a bridal. Seconds later, this bait was trolled through a school of dolphin. It became lunchmeat for a trophy yellowfin tuna.

Another really neat thing about this time slot is that at any moment there could be three or more boats hooked up right on the reef, giving the avid photographer a great opportunity to take some of those cherished boat-to-boat marlin jumping shots. Boats had a good mix of blue and black marlin during our visit, and when the wind blew we had marlin tailing around us. The visual of finding 600-pound marlin tailing downswell is something I will never forget.

A really good tuna bite can also ensue this time of year, too. Fish seem to hold out off the drop-off and hang under dolphin schools. If you can find some dolphins, chances are they are holding tuna, so if you have big live baits in the tubes, you are bound to catch a yellowfin over 100 pounds – and you have a great chance for the mighty 200- or 300-pounder.

December, January, and February may not be the best time for you to visit if you're into catching a large variety (though that all starts to change as you work your way into March); however, if your dream is fighting a black marlin, with the densest rainforest in the world for a backdrop, this is the time for you.



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