



KEN SCHULTZ
Fishing Editor, ESPNOutdoors.com



CATERPILLAR **LEARN MORE**

ALSO SEE

- More Ken Schultz Columns
- Ken Schultz: Questions for Ken, No. 8
- Ken Schultz: Want to catch a king? Get to the Niagara River now
- Ken Schultz: A Highlands party for Atlantic stripers
- Ken Schultz: Canada's Salmon Interpretive Centre a must-see
- Ken Schultz: Rockin' on the Chesapeake
- More Features
- More News

Chunk-a-chunk of tuna love

In the Hudson Canyon, after dark, tenacious tuna come out to play
 By Ken Schultz
 ESPNOutdoors.com Fishing editor

MANASQUAN, N.J. — It's 4:30 on a Friday afternoon and we've just arrived in the Hudson Canyon, 92 miles from port after a four-hour, full-throttle run on the Jenny Lee.



Steve Raines, left, and son David hoist a yellowfin tuna at sunrise.

A favored offshore fishing spot, the Hudson Canyon is a valleylike underwater location, where the gently sloping continental shelf drops off toward abyssal depths.

The ocean is flat, so we've made it in the least amount of time that this charter boat, a mint-condition, 44-foot Henriques, can manage. A bonus from the smooth ride: there's been no *mal de mer* symptoms for any of our party of six.

Thanks to GPS navigation, we'll anchor in 100 fathoms of water in exactly the same place that this boat had been on the previous night, when a different group of people had caught 18 tuna and lost nearly the same amount.

It occurs to me that we might have been better off not knowing how the previous party did; it has raised the expectations of our crew, three of whom have never been offshore fishing for tuna before, and every day is different.

The mate, Sean, begins chumming. Five rods are set out with hooked sardines or squid. The wait begins.

6:30 p.m.

There's been no action so far, but the sun is dipping into the water on the horizon, pasting the sky and a few wispy clouds in a tangerinelike color that interior decorators might call "Florida mango," "Orange spice" or "Autumn flare."

Boats have been arriving steadily and there are at least three-dozen in the distance around us, most of them more than a quarter-mile away.



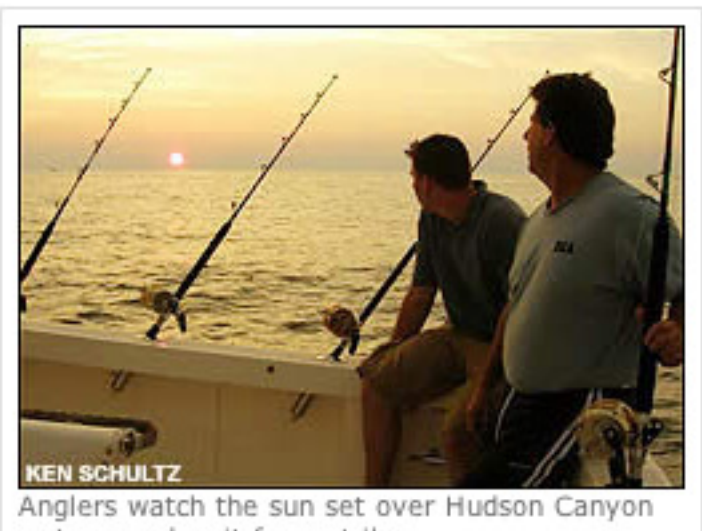
The Jenny Lee's captain and owner, Dave Bender, bemoans the size of the sportfishing fleet, brought on by the weekend and good weather prospects, speculating that all of this competition will make it harder for us to produce.

It seems that the high cost of fuel — it will take more than 400 gallons of diesel for our boat to complete its trip — is not deterring offshore anglers.

9:15 p.m.

For nearly five hours Sean has been making sure that a steady flow of chunked butterfish — we've brought eight 25-pound flats with us — is sent down and out in the current, creating a scent and tidbit trail that must be hundreds of yards long by now.

He is aided in this by an ingenious machine called a Chum Chunker, which features a moving belt that flips pieces of bait into the water periodically.



Anglers watch the sun set over Hudson Canyon waters, and wait for a strike.

The mate uses a double-handled, machetelike knife to cut the frozen butterfish into chunks and regularly makes sure there is enough in the bottom of the device to keep it conveying bait into the water.

The ocean is calm but there's a light breeze pushing across the 76-degree surface water.

Five overhead halogen lights illuminate the back of the Jenny Lee and the immediate vicinity.

It is so bright that you can see well into the water, watching sargassum weed drift by and occasionally spotting small mahi-mahi cruising right up to the boat after the chum.

Suddenly, one rod screams and everyone jumps to attack-mode attention. Ryan McCormick grabs the rod and has all he can do to hang on for a while.



Chunks of butterfish head to the water and the chum line.

After 10 tense minutes he gets the fish near enough to the boat so that all of us, leaning over the gunwale, can see that it's a good-size yellowfin tuna.

But the tuna dives for the ocean floor, pulling off all of the line that Ryan's aching arms have fought in.

Tuna are the hardest fighters in the sea. They never quit and they gain strength when an angler rests, so it takes an aggressive pumping-and-reeling action to overcome a tuna's tenacity.

It will be 20 more minutes before the fish comes to the boat and is close enough to be deftly gaffed.

It turns out to be a 90-pounder, which is not as big as yellowfin get, but which is as large as they have recently been running in local waters.

Everyone's pumped.

11:55 p.m.

One of the baited lines that we have out is attached to a chemiluminescent light stick and lowered 175 feet in the water, far below the chum and in the range where, it is hoped, we might catch a broadbill swordfish.

When the rod bows over suddenly and the line starts peeling off the reel, Jimmy Ross is fast to a swordfish. It takes about 15 minutes to land this elusive and uncommonly caught creature, whose large glassy eyes look almost spooky when reflected in the bright boat lights.

Ross elects to keep it — the limit is one per boat — so the swordfish joins the tuna in a large floor-hold compartment.

3:00 a.m.

McCormick, Ross and David Raines are asleep in the cabin. McCormick's brother John, Raines' father, Steve, the mate and I are up and talking in the stern under the lights. There are no rods baited deep for swordfish, so it's a surprise when a transom-mounted tuna-baited rod bends over.

I grab it and discover a swordfish has come up relatively shallow to take the hooked squid that was on this line. Simultaneously, one of the port rods bends over under the strike of a yellowfin tuna. John McCormick grabs that rod and holds on. Seconds later, one of the starboard rods bends over, also under the strike of a yellowfin tuna. The commotion stirs everyone on the boat.

If you're going ...

The Jenny Lee fishes for tuna and mahi-mahi, plus the occasional swordfish and marlin, in offshore waters from late July through mid-November. The latter months produce good fishing but spotty weather, so some dates get cancelled then because of sea conditions.

For more information, visit the Web site. Contact captain Dave Bender at 732-292-2737 or at tunafishing@sprintmail.com.

For a moment my swordfish appears lost. But it comes to the surface and I reel up tight to the fish. Suddenly it is 40 feet away in the edge of the light-glow, facing the boat and charging. It rushes the starboard transom corner. I can't reel fast enough to catch up to it, watching it race under and past the corner of the boat.

Steve Raines' tuna is putting so much tension on the rod that he is momentarily unable to lift the rod but out of the holder. Unfortunately, this means that my line and his line are going to touch each other when my swordfish races by.

By the time my line gets tight to the swordfish again, the two lines are crossing each other. When that happens — two lines under great tension touching — one of them is going to snap. Mine does, and the swordfish rushes off into the darkness.

But Raines gets the rod out of its holder and both he and John McCormick land their tunas after much commotion, swapping places in the boat, and following their unyielding fish around the boat. The yellowfins are a matched pair of 50-pounders.

6:15 a.m.

A stunning sunrise signals the start of a Saturday filled with delightful weather but also heralds the end of our fishing action.

Over the last three hours we'd had frequent flurries of activity. In all, 14 tuna from 30 to 90 pounds plus a few mahi-mahi, had come to the boat, and we'd lost perhaps a half-dozen fish that had been hooked briefly. Bender had feared the action would slow as the sun rose. He was right. The last tuna caught came before 6 o'clock.

Ordinarily, the boat would pick up and finish the outing by surface trolling, perhaps finding a marlin to round out the catch. But there are so many weeds in the offshore waters, a remnant of mid-Atlantic storms, that trolling is impractical.

At 7:30 we pull in lines for the four-hour trip home, with aching arms and backs, knowing that there will be a bounty of sashimi and grill-seared steaks yet to come.

Ken Schultz is the author of the new book "Bass Madness," as well as "Ken Schultz's Fishing Encyclopedia," available through www.kenschultz.com.

GET READY FOR THE
can-am
 CHALLENGE

**I CAN-AM.
 CAN YOU?**

COM
 CAN

Adjust Font Size: