



Thunnus Thynnus *The Atlantic Bluefin Tuna*



Bluefin Tuna of the British Isles in the new millennia.

Bluefin of the British Isles:

The Tuna of the Mediterranean have been documented for thousands of years, and whilst we don't have the wealth of ancient records of such fish around the British Isles, there does exist evidence of their presence at various points over the last several hundred years. Mike Thrussel has written an excellent article on this topic, a history of British Bluefin Tuna Fishing, which you can access via links on our website.

What is clear from Mike's article, is that the recent (re)appearance of Bluefin around our coasts is not unprecedented, and they may well yet present the opportunity for a sustainable, valuable sports fishery for anglers from the UK and further afield.

In this article we'll look at more recent developments, Bluefin of the new millennia.

Irish eyes are smiling....

In the mid to late-1980s giant Bluefin were being seen, and occasionally caught by trawlers out of County Donegal. It wasn't until the Autumn of 1997 however that they were being spotted in Donegal Bay. They confounded all anglers attempts to catch them, until the 24th September 2000, when Brian McGilloway's charter boat, fishing out of Killybegs, boated the first recorded fish on rod and line. That 353 pounder was followed the next day, by a new Irish record, a 529lb monster. Brian took one more fish that season.



However Adrian Molloy, who was to become the undisputed godfather of Irish Bluefin fishing, stunned the fishing world in October 2001, with the capture of a 968lb fish, seen at left.

This Bluefin set a new Irish Record, and was one of 11 taken that season between two boats.

In 2002 Irish captures soared to around 25 fish, and in the following year Adrian alone had 50 strikes, 18 hookups, and 12 fish boatside.

The 19 fish captured in 2004 marked the effective conclusion of that era of Bluefin fishing in NW Ireland however....

2005 saw ZERO fish recorded, 2006 just one, and again none in 2007 when fishing efforts were abandoned due to the lack of fish.

The obvious conclusion is that the disappearance of these fish seen was linked to the massive decline that was occurring in the Atlantic stock at that time. That collapse led to the drastic ICCAT quota cuts implemented from 2007/8 in an attempt to save the species.

Irish Bluefin, a Tuna 'missing link'.

Before the collapse in Irish Bluefin numbers in 2005/6, their presence caught the attention of Stanford University's 'Tag a Giant' team. It was thought that Ireland could have been a 'meet and eat' transit point for fish from both sides of the Atlantic, and could potentially provide great information on the lifestyle of Atlantic Bluefin.

In 2003 and 2004 a total of 6 Pop-up Satellite Tags (PSAT's) were attached to Bluefin captured by Adrian and the TAG team on board his vessel. Whilst three of the six failed to work, the remaining three provided valuable information despite the small sample.

I cover this in more detail in my article '*Migration and management, a short history*' that you can find elsewhere on this site. In brief however, two fish tagged the same day, from the same boat proved that 'Western' and 'Eastern/Mediterranean' fish were mingling off Donegal that Autumn. The third PSAT recorded an epic trek back and forth from Ireland to the mid-Atlantic several times, before heading into the Mediterranean, being captured near Malta. It covered over 17,000km in little over eight months....

They're back!

As the ICCAT quota measures began to bear fruit and the Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) recovered, Bluefin returned to the Irish grounds in 2012. Other factors such as the amount and migration patterns of their prey-fish likely also contributed.

Declan Kilgannon, skipper of 'Kiwi Girl' reopened Ireland's Bluefin account with two fish within days of one another in September 2013, the largest 628lb. In 2014 the Irish authorities announced a 'ban' on recreational Bluefin fishing, and a reminder in 2015 that the fishery was still 'closed'. Despite these pronouncements however fishing vessels continued to catch and release over 100 Bluefin off Donegal in 2015.

Adrian Molloy worked tirelessly to try and persuade the Irish Government to pursue a quota from their EU partners, and establish a Recreational fishery. This fell on deaf ears in Dublin however. Not to be deterred Adrian set out to obtain Tagging Program derogations to allow the continued capture, tag, release and study of these fish.

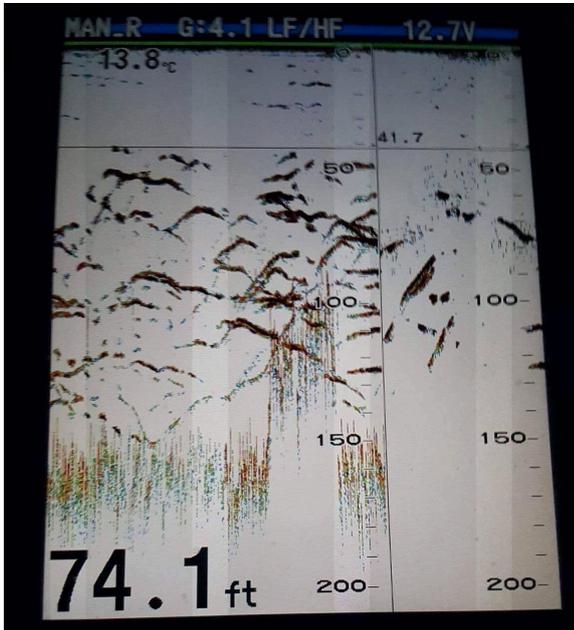
In 2016 Adrian was once again working with Stanford University, aided by a team from the University of Exeter. In that program 16 PSAT's were attached to Bluefin. As yet, no data have been released from this program.

As I write this piece in September 2018 Adrian Molloy has had another phenomenally successful season tagging Bluefin off Donegal. In little over seven weeks he has tagged nearly 150 fish!

Ireland is clearly sitting upon a world class Recreational Bluefin Tuna fishery, and it beggars belief that despite all the great work done by Adrian, and the evidence staring them in the face, that Government officials in Dublin are unable, or unwilling to obtain even a 5/10 tonne mortality quota for a Recreational C+R fishery that could feasibly bring millions of Euros in Revenue to the North West of Ireland each Autumn.

To finish up on Ireland....

The North West of Ireland has not had an exclusive on Irish Bluefin Tuna. For a number of years, since 2015, Mike Dennehy, owner of Kinsale Charters, fishing out of Kinsale in the South East of the Republic, had been encountering Bluefin from inshore to way out towards the Celtic Deeps.



2017 was a bumper year for Bluefin out of the South East of Eire it would seem. Unprecedented numbers of Bluefin were present over the Autumn.

This sonar image from Mike shows dozens of huge Bluefin under his boat one night.

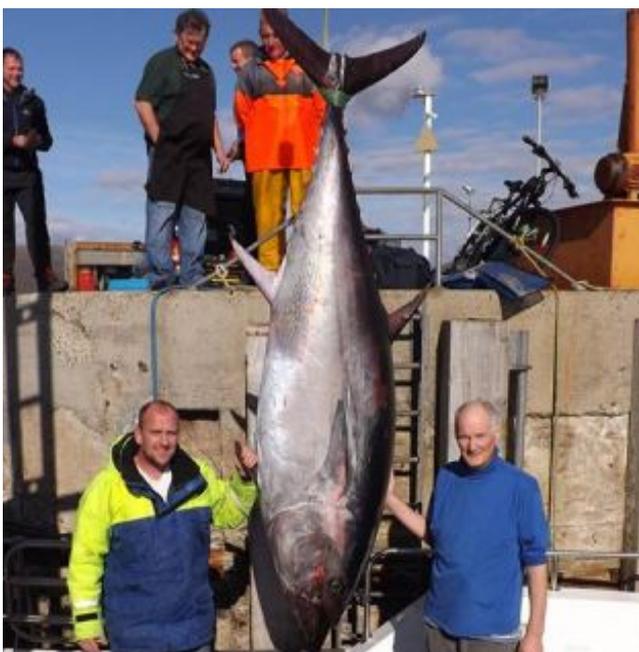
Multiple numbers of fish of 600lbs+ were hooked, and there was a credible report of one probable 'grander'.

Mike sadly passed away in July 2018, and a true pioneer of Irish Tuna fishing in the South East was lost.

Scotland.

Bluefin were being spotted off the Outer Hebrides, towards St Kilda, around the same time the big Bluefin were returning to the Donegal coast, a few hundred miles to the South.

In 2013 Angus Campbell - the owner of St Kilda Cruises - set out to catch one of these monsters, and kitted out his vessel with appropriate tackle supplied by a US tackle company, Fisherman's Outfitters.



In September, trolling spreader bars 50 miles South West of the Isle of Harris, Angus had a double strike.

The smaller of the two fish was lost, but after an hour long battle the second fish was brought alongside.

Deep hooked, the fish was retained, and back on shore weighed in at 515lb.

This was the first Bluefin taken by rod and line in Scotland. Angus hooked up three fish in the remainder of 2013, and went on to appear on a US Fishing channel documentary, on the Bluefin of Scotland.

The following year Dr. Francis Neat of Marine Scotland Science, with ICCAT support, and funding from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the European Fisheries Fund, set up a tagging program, that resulted in three fish being tagged with PSATs in collaboration with Angus, who had seven hook-ups in that year.

Information from various skippers, along with PSAT data from fish tagged off Portugal, and Sweden, confirmed the continued presence in 2017 and 2018 of large Bluefin in Scottish waters. From Islay, through the Outer Hebrides, and up around the Orkneys and Shetland Islands, Bluefin are now regularly feeding or transiting. Here is yet another potentially hugely valuable resource that could provide significant revenue to these communities via a sustainable, scientifically valuable Recreational fishery.

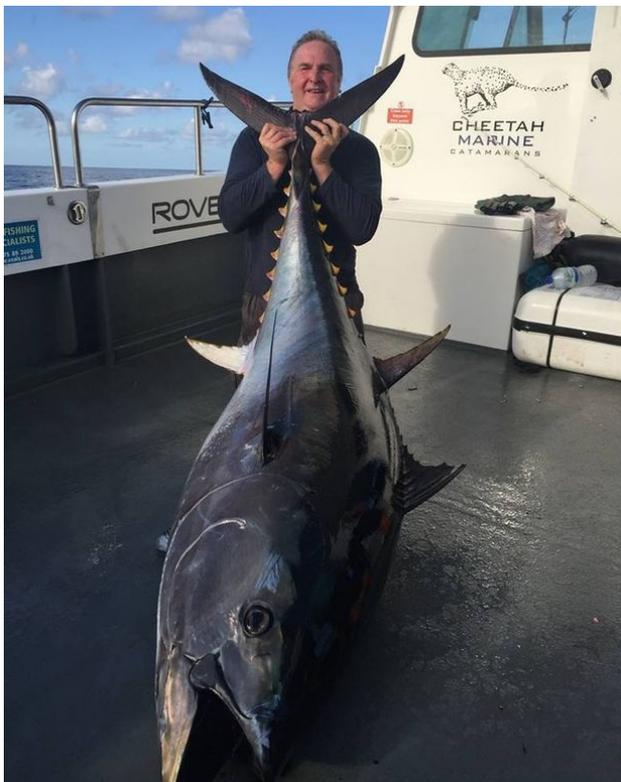
Welsh Bluefin.

With fish appearing off South East Ireland, it was only a matter of time before boats out of ports in SW Wales reported Bluefin encounters.

Several charter and private boats regularly pursue Blue and Porbeagle sharks in the Celtic Deeps, 30-40 miles South West of Milford Haven. In 2015, whilst sharking in the Deeps upon Andrew Alsop's boat 'White Water' angler Chris Betts hooked a 'steam train' that turned out to be a 500lb Atlantic Bluefin. Angler Mike Steer hooked up to a 300lb fish in the same area shortly after.

In 2016, charter skipper Rob Rennie's hooked up and lost one. David Price on Atlantic Blue was luckier, bringing an estimated 250lb fish boat-side. Sharking guru Andy Griffiths, on board Andrew Alsop's WhiteWater, also brought a 300lb fish boatside the same month.

Giant Bluefin returned again to Welsh waters in 2017



In August of that year, Andrew Alsop once again hooked up to a big Bluefin on 30lb class tackle whilst sharking in the Celtic Deeps..

A two hour battle ensued, without the benefit of any harness. The fish took the boat on a three mile trip as the anglers tried to keep in touch with it.

Andrew succeeded in bringing the fish boatside where it took five anglers to bring it onboard. It was estimated to weigh around 450/500lb.

On such tackle, this was an epic achievement, but not an advert for the average angler to try and capture Bluefin on such gear!

Two days later, Rob Rennie on his boat Lady Jue 5 landed a fish estimated at a similar size. There were subsequently reports of substantial numbers of very large fish in the Deeps, including some appearing to be in the 1000lb range.... 'Granders'. This was consistent with Mike Dennehy's experiences in that same general area.

Cornish Bluefin.

It is the Bluefin appearances off the Southern coast of far West Cornwall that have received the most publicity it seems. This may well be due to their presence close inshore, often just 2-3 miles out, in contrast to the Scottish and Welsh fish that were usually encountered 40/50 miles offshore.



From 2013 reports of Shark anglers being smashed up were increasingly common.

2015 saw increasing reports of schools of Bluefin busting baitfish at various points along the South Cornwall coast.

In August 2016, 16 year old Joe Amos, whilst on a sharking trip out of Looe, captured a circa 160lb Bluefin.

Arguably it was this that really brought Cornwall's Bluefin into the mainstream consciousness.

2016 went on to be a seminal year for Cornish Bluefin. Fish appeared in large numbers in Falmouth Bay in October, attracted by an influx of bait species, and stayed there for several weeks. Accidentally or otherwise, multiple Bluefin were hooked, played and released by anglers that Autumn.

In 2017 Bluefin were first seen in July by Scallop boats around the Lizard, and over the following months they were spotted from the Scillies to the Eddystone. Unlike 2016 the fish did not seem to hold in one area for any length of time, a reflection of the transient nature of their prey perhaps? But once again, multiple fish were encountered, hooked and released by anglers that Autumn. It is also worth noting that Bluefin were even being reported pursuing Pilchards in January of 2018 in the same areas.

As at September 2018, the story of Cornish Bluefin has a new chapter underway. Since July, larger numbers of fish, in bigger schools, have been seen from the Scillies to Start Point. A 700lb fish was caught accidentally in nets near Brixham.

Exeter University, with experience in the 2016 Irish tagging program, were selected in early 2018 to run a DEFRA satellite tagging program of these fish in 2018 and 2019.

The future?

There is still uncertainty about exactly what is driving the re-appearance of these Bluefin around our coastlines. The overall recovery in stock levels, increased food competition, and changes in currents, water temperatures, prey patterns etc, all may be playing a part. One thing to note is that even the smaller fish off Cornwall encountered in 2016 and 2017 were born BEFORE the recovery in numbers post-2010. In 2018, evidence to date would suggest an even wider range of 'year classes' and sizes of fish are present. As the larger numbers of post-2010 fish mature and are able to travel more widely, could this lead to greater numbers of fish in British waters?

The re-appearance of these fish may yet present a fantastic opportunity for the UK to develop a sustainable, valuable recreational fishery, attracting anglers from across the globe to pursue this iconic gamefish.

However, the UK currently has no share of the EU's substantial Quota from ICCAT for Atlantic Bluefin. Under ICCAT rules, the UK is unable to authorize any recreational fishing for Bluefin without a Quota. UK Fisheries Authorities – DEFRA and the MMO - have repeatedly stated that it is illegal for UK anglers to target Bluefin, and that any captured accidentally whilst fishing for other species, must be released unharmed in the water.

Negotiating a piece of the EU's precious Quota would likely be a very drawn out and expensive process. However, one potential benefit of Brexit is that the path to a Quota and Recreational fishery may be much easier.

Joining ICCAT as a Sovereign member, (rather than under the EU's 'umbrella'), could allow the UK Government to request a small Quota and apply that to a Recreational fishery.

If operated, initially at least as an exclusively 'Catch and Release' Recreational fishery, it could set a world leading standard in sustainable, economically optimal, scientifically valuable Bluefin fisheries.

If that sounds of interest to you, then check out our **Bluefin Tuna UK** Campaign.

Follow our Campaign on Facebook - [Bluefin Tuna UK](#)
Or on our Website – www.bluefintuna.co.uk

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