



## ***Sportfishing Club of the British Isles***

### ***UK Bluefin Tuna update by Steve Murphy - December 2019***

For the fourth year running Atlantic Bluefin returned in numbers to the UK's Western waters this year.

The first sightings I heard of this Summer were made in July in the far SW and the Channel Islands. By August fish were off Donegal and, shortly after, being reported in the waters of the Outer Hebrides. (This MAY be a little earlier than 2018, or maybe I am just better informed this year?) What is definite is that by 15th August they were present off the Lizard Peninsula.

Of great interest though is that prior to the July arrivals, in May 2019, I received sporadic reports of fish off Cornwall. Given that was just weeks before spawning - at least regarding the main areas in the Mediterranean - it begs the question why they weren't all back in, or close to their known spawning areas. Maybe some of the PSATs from this year will solve that riddle?

The ThunnusUK project had a 'bumper run' from the 23rd August, with fish holding in one very localised area off the Manacles for a spell before weather or lack of feed moved them on. The program tagged 19 Bluefin in 7 days fishing over a 16 day period 23rd to 8th September.

Sadly the Recreational Angler (RSA) program, lobbied for and won this year, did not get authorisations signed off until early September, just before a spell of bad weather curtailed operations! For a variety of reasons there were very few days this season that operation in the SW incorporated RSA participation. I will report in more detail on that at the AGM in January. For the time being I just wanted to say many thanks to those Club Members who registered with ThunnusUK, and for their patience & understanding as we tried to pull dates together against a very challenging backdrop. As outlined below, there are reasons to be optimistic on this front for 2020.

Whilst on the ThunnusUK aspect it is great to be able to report that Welsh operations under Andrew Alsop got under way this year, after our lobbying directly to the Fisheries Minister earlier this year. At the time of writing Andrew has tagged three fish with the assistance of our very own Jon Patten. A fantastic start to learning more about those specific Celtic Deeps Bluefin! And finally in ThunnusUK with some cajoling, pleading and threats we helped get the Scottish tagging program 'over the line'. But very late in the day.

Asked by the skipper Angus Campbell - who operates out of Harris in the Outer Hebrides to assist - I booked flights on the Sunday night for the Monday morning, whilst still awaiting the final 'go' from Marine Scotland which was anticipated to arrive Monday

AM ..... Again, more detail in January's report, but we did FIND Bluefin, but with little feed to hold them up in the water on a 'big' tide, we just couldn't get a take with the prescribed spreader bar technique.



There were undoubtedly disappointments regards what we wanted from the Tagging program this year, and controversies. But the crucial fact is that we have set the precedent for RSA participation, and widened the program out to several other key areas. Looking at the bigger picture, 26 Cornish Bluefin, and at least three Welsh Bluefin will add to our knowledge and contribute to the evidence base we need to justify a Recreational C+R fishery.

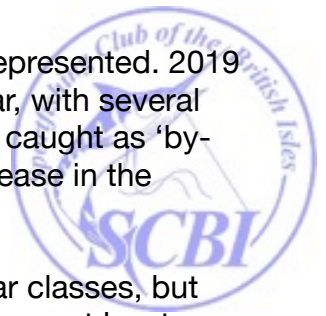
**Back to the fish.** The ThunnusUK operations in the SW concluded late November with 26 fish tagged. Combined with the records I receive from a variety of other sources, we have a decent database of information regarding distribution and Year Classes.

I am awaiting the last 7-8 fish statistics from Exeter University but what is patently clear is that the average size and range of Bluefin in the SW this year was larger in both respects. 2018 ThunnusUK stats from the 10 fish they tagged then provided a useful metric of sizes. (Nine of those tags successfully detached & reported, and I think Simon Thomas might report soon on that very successful result.)

The formula ThunnusUK used to determine weights from length & girth is I believe flawed, and overstates the weights they report. More on that in January though. However, taking the Curved Fork Lengths (CFL) reported, and a widely used length to weight chart for both 2018 and 2019, there is a clear conclusion.



The average size of fish caught in the SW in 2019 was notably higher than that of 2018. The spreader bar technique mandated by ThunnusUK DOES seem to bring a smaller size of fish on average to the boat than other techniques. But the picture is still pretty clear, and anecdotally borne out by other data from 'by-caught' BFT.



2018 fish averaged around 215lbs, with age classes from 6-9 years old represented. 2019 fish - with 19-26 Bluefin data - indicate an average nearer 300lbs this year, with several much larger fish in the mix. Other data I have with estimated sizes of fish caught as 'by-catch' suggest a larger average size falling to live-baits, but a similar increase in the average size of fish taken in 2019 over 2018.

Most of the change can be attributed to year-on-year growth in these year classes, but there does appear to be evidence of OLDER fish visiting the UK this year - or at least being caught this year!



Even accounting for 'excitement' and inexperience at judging weights of such fish boat-side I have pretty conclusive evidence of multiple fish well over 400lbs this year and, in the SW, several over 500lb with three around 600lbs. We also know such fish are present from several large ones taken in nets this year.

Once again we have also received reports of sub-100lb BFT across the SW, and I have personally seen such fish off Falmouth for the

second year running. But it is interesting that of the dozens of fish caught in the SW the last two years from boats the smallest ever reported to me was about 125lbs in 2017. And that was a real outlier versus the typical size of fish taken. Additionally the shore-caught fish from Chesil Beach has now been confirmed as a juvenile BFT, which is noteworthy on many levels.



**Then to the distribution of fish.** Well in the SW, supported by credible eye-witness reports and PSAT data from a 2018 tagged fish, we know BFT have ventured further East than we previously believed. Regular reports are of fish across to the Weymouth area together with lots of fish on a similar longitude off the Channel Islands. And a PSAT track showed one fish SW of the Isle of Wight. They all confirm

this. Additionally I have heard reports of fish off Eastbourne, but have to-date seen no verifiable photographic evidence of that.



Then to the North coast of Cornwall. Despite confirmed sightings and several reports of 'caught' fish - ALL I understand turned out to lost before leading - until this year there had been no confirmed catch, revive and release events on the North Coast. That changed this year with a circa 500lb fish taken off St Ives in late August. Another fish was recently - 3rd December - taken in the same location.



Away from the SW the Celtic Deeps continues to generate reports of large BFT present, and we have confirmed their presence in the Outer Hebrides. I also received further reports of fish in the Inner Hebrides and Northern Ireland around Rathlin Island, Orkney & the Shetlands this year some of which are confirmed as fish transiting to/from Norway/ Sweden.

Maybe we are just getting more reports as people become more aware of the Campaign? But what is clear is that BFT are present across pretty much the entire Western waters of the UK from Summer through to year-end. (The Irish Sea off Anglesey/ Liverpool is 'a bit of a missing link' still despite some reports unfortunately again unaccompanied by photographic evidence.)

**How about numbers?** Again there is no scientifically credible metric to hand yet that helps with assessing numbers, but anecdotally I would say we had as many fish consistently inshore as in 2018 in the SW. More storms in 2019 created larger gaps in their presence as the prey and Bluefin moved offshore. But when the 'windows' were here substantial numbers of fish were present. I'll share some more data at the AGM.

**The Future - 2020?** Well, we can only hope that this pattern of Bluefin visitation will repeat itself. There are good reasons to believe it will.

**Regarding the Campaign and fishing opportunities?** Well, my understanding is that there IS a desire at DEFRA to extend the initial two year (2018/2019) tagging operations, but that funding has yet to be confirmed. If this comes about we will press for a further widening of RSA involvement in the project. With the precedent of 2019 we may yet get RSA involved by August/September, when the weather and voracious appetite of the post-spawned fish could make for some great capture opportunities.

Additionally, the Campaign will be lobbying for a wider, more open Floy tagging program along the lines of Ireland's 'CHART' program of this year. I experienced that program first hand in October and spent a lot of time discussing it with both Adrian Molloy and the Irish Fisheries Number 2 official in the program. Such a program with a larger number of authorised charter vessels, and lower angler experience thresholds could again provide a great opportunity for RSA to get involved in this key citizen science as the UK builds a case for Quota at the 11/2020 ICCAT meeting.

**The bad news.** One cornerstone of our proposal for a Recreational C+R fishery is that UK RSAs and charter skippers can be trusted to operate - as required by ICCAT - a fishery that meets the member states ICCAT obligations. Key to that is our ability to demonstrate that we can do exactly what other members anglers such as Canada for example can do:

namely bringing fish boat-side in reasonable timeframes, effectively recovering them and releasing them with a very high prospect of surviving.

Done properly, this is very do-able, especially when talking about the average size of fish in SW waters and, to a degree, Welsh and Scottish waters (where the apparent larger average size might possibly dictate use of fighting chairs and 130lb class tackle). With that in mind, it is frustrating to see continued multiple Facebook posts from a variety of sources reporting two to three hour fights, which are totally avoidable in the vast majority of cases.

I have never said anglers should not target them. I understand the desire to do so and the sense of injustice from anglers and skippers regarding the current situation. However where it is being done ill-equipped, ill-prepared and/or ill-informed and then boasting of outcomes through social media that really undermine our case. It will be 'thrown in our faces' by our opponents, including some within the UK Fisheries Authorities. It is really, really unhelpful.

I don't comment publicly on this topic because it will just provide more ammunition for our opponents to see us arguing in public forums. But we need to be under no illusions that this information is being collated by those who oppose what we seek.

I'm happy to talk directly to any members on this issue, just message me initially via Facebook or e-mail - [stevensmrphy@me.com](mailto:stevensmrphy@me.com).

*Steve*