What makes false albacore such extraordinary gamefish? A lot of things, it turns out.

Amazing ALBIES

BY ED MITCHELL

LOTS OF ANGLERS HAVE WRITTEN LOTS OF WORDS ABOUT FISHING FOR FALSE ALBACORE. And why not? They're fascinating, exciting, challenging fish. For many fly fishers, catching a few albies is the high point of an entire season. Most of us never tire of reading—or thinking—about fishing for them.

But it might be interesting to take a different approach, one that steps back and considers the false albacore as a species. To that end, I dug through the scientific journals and pulled out the pertinent facts. Maybe what I found will help you to better understand these wonderful creatures, and to catch more of them. I know it has helped me.

So, instead of covering tackle and flies, what lies ahead examines where albies are found, the types of places they prefer, how they behave, what they eat, and how they eat it. We'll finish up with a look at the physical attributes that make these fish so awesomely powerful.

PHOTOS: JIM LEVISON

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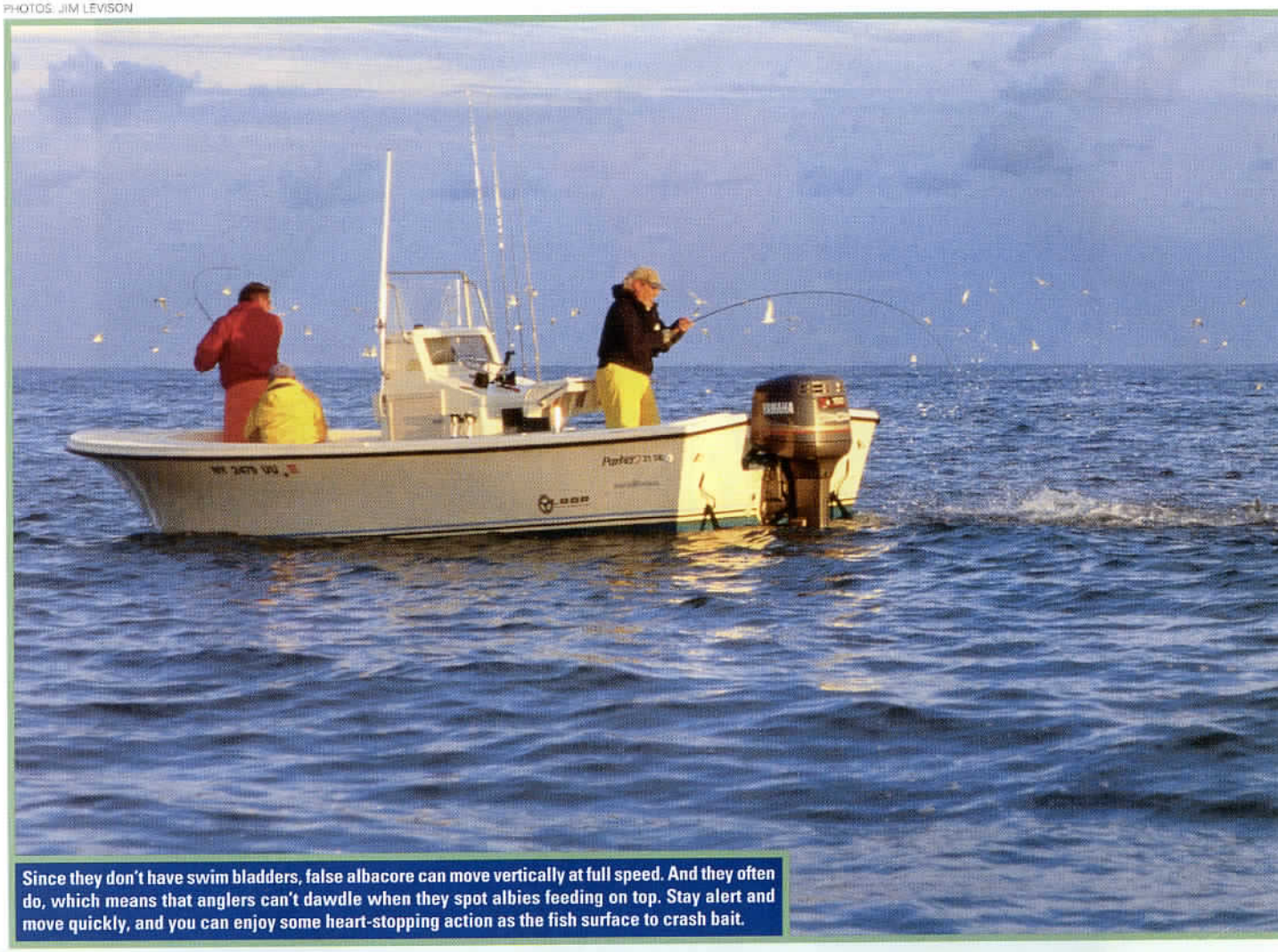

Since they don't have swim bladders, false albacore can move vertically at full speed. And they often do, which means that anglers can't dawdle when they spot albies feeding on top. Stay alert and move quickly, and you can enjoy some heart-stopping action as the fish surface to crash bait.

Small Members of a Big Family

FALSE albacore belong to the tuna tribe, which makes them mackerels and, more specifically, members of the Scrombriadae family. Their life span is upwards of 10 to 15 years, about that of a bluefish and half that of a striped bass.

By tuna standards, they're welterweights. In southern New England, albies average between 6 and 12 pounds. They run bigger along the North Carolina coast, where quite a few reach weights of 15 to 20 pounds. The relationship of weight and length varies, but some data indicate that a two-footer is about 9 pounds, and a 30-inch fish weighs about 16. If they live long enough, false albacore can reach a maximum length of four feet and a weight of about 35 pounds. You probably don't have enough backing for one like that.

Feeding Habits

MOST tunas are creatures of the deep, briny blue. Fortunately for fly rodders, albies are an exception—they're greenwater fish. Young-of-the-year albies inhabit offshore waters, and adults may, too, but most false albacore live near shore in depths of less than 100 feet. And as anglers well know, these fish will at times roar right down the beach, practically at your feet.

By nature the albie is a schooling predator that groups by size. They typically feed heavily during daylight hours, with peak eating action usually occurring on a running tide in early morning or mid-afternoon. Albies love places with well-defined bottom structure, particularly those accompanied by steep contours and ample current. That translates into rips, especially those associated with inlets and points of land, or humps and reefs far out from shore.

False albacore spend lots of time in shallow water—sometimes right along the beach.

The squiggly lines on their backs are most likely camouflage for working near the surface in clear, sunlit waters. And, much to the delight of fly rodders, albies frequently dine on top, though they rarely stay there very long; more on that subject later. I have watched from a boat as albies zoomed after bait in transparent, shallow water. As they passed by the hull in chest-deep water, I could see that the green along their backs glowed like bright neon. Perhaps that electric color is a signal to their buddies that they have the prey locked in their sights.

Naturally, schooling predators move around from day to day follow-

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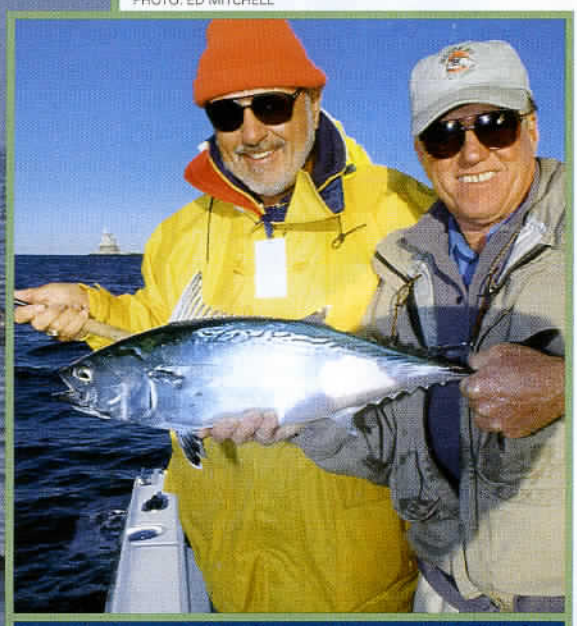


Capt. Joe Keegan holds a fine specimen caught by Nick Curcione off the coast of New York. The hard, rigid "wrist" of the tail makes a good handle by which to hold the fish.

ing the most abundant bait, but false albacore seem to take it to an extreme. One day they're all around the boat, kicking butt and taking names, and the following day you can't find a single one. It's common for false-albacore fishing to be feast or famine, much to the chagrin of anglers and guides.

The quantity of bait in an area is likely to have a noticeable effect on your hookup rate. When schools of forage fish get large and highly concentrated, false albacore tend to attack in large numbers and very aggressively, eager to sock any fly thrown into their midst. The reverse is also true. When the bait is in small pods and spread out, the albies split up into squadrons of perhaps only 5 to 10 fish. The action becomes sporadic, harder to predict, and more challenging. Still, this type of fishing has its bright side. The more spread out the action, the more spread out the anglers. While the fishing is apt to be difficult, it may also be more fun.

Attacking in Formation

OVER millions of years of evolution, predator fish have developed strategies with which to surround and attack bait. These strategies vary according to the particular strengths of individual species. Some species are ambush oriented, launching sudden attacks at short range, and others are high-speed warriors, overcoming their prey with sheer speed. Albies fit into that category. And they do it with style.

Capt. Joe Keegan of Montauk and I once saw false albacore feeding on a grand scale. While we were casting off the port side, an odd sound made us turn and look to starboard. A phalanx of albies, likely numbering over a hundred, had come to the surface, and the noise we heard was the sound of them literally mowing their way across the top. White water, flying bait, albies squirting out of the sea—it made an awesome sight. Since then, I have watched small schools

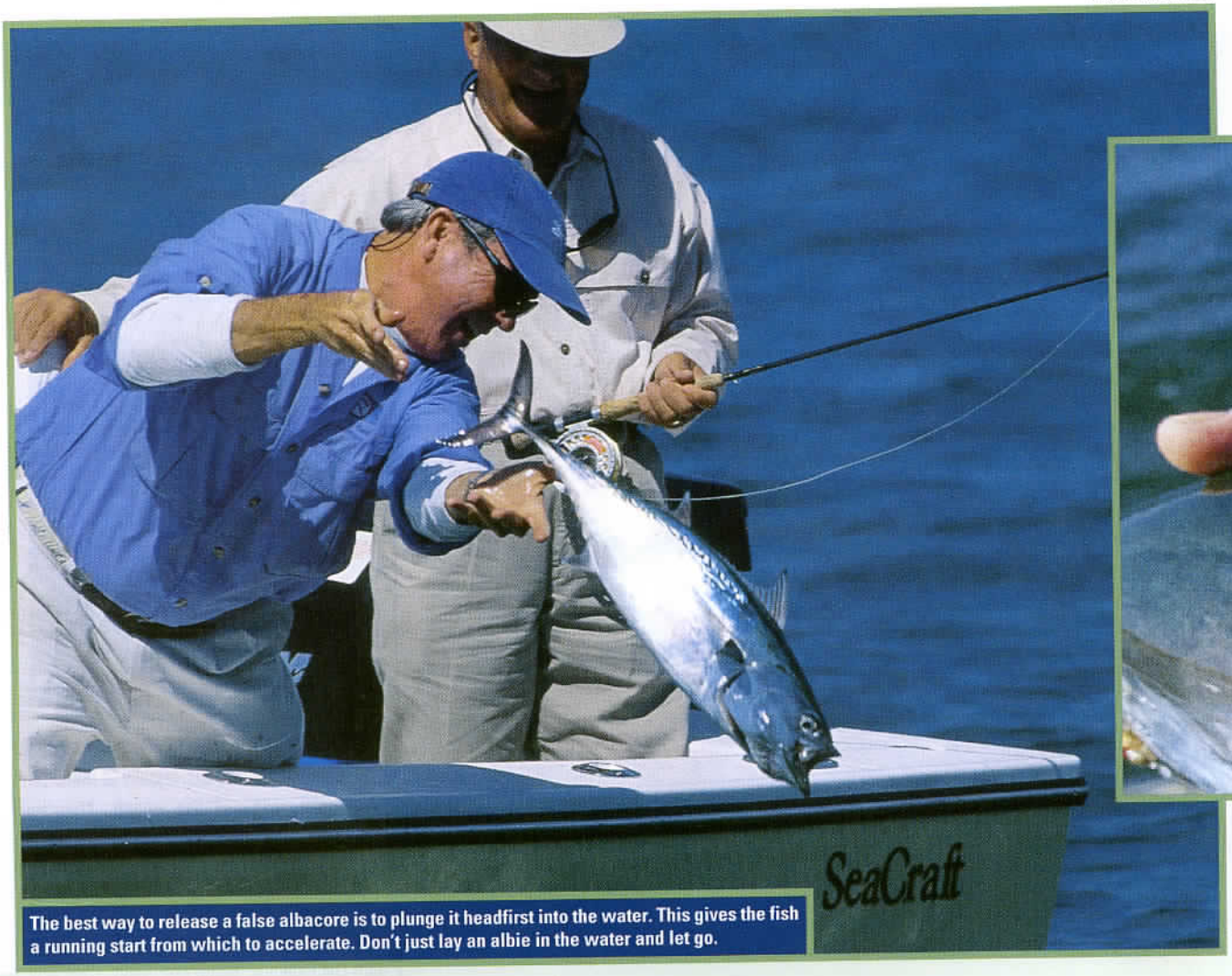
Geographic Range

THE ALBIE is likely the most numerous tuna in the Atlantic, equally at home on both sides of the ocean. They're warmwater beasts for the most part, and therefore most abundant in tropical and subtropical waters. Still, false albacore are found over an enormous range that changes with the seasons. Along our coast, they are well known from the south arm of Cape Cod—including the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket—southward to the Florida Keys. They are also found throughout the Caribbean, and likewise throughout much of the Gulf of Mexico. Farther south still, they range down to Brazil.

On the far side of the pond, false albacore prowl the Mediterranean and its adjoining seas, the Aegean, Marmara, and Black. They can be found off the coast of Spain, too, and occasionally wander northward past the southwest corner of England, through the English Channel, and up into the North Sea. False albacore are found south of Spain as well, along the entire west coast of Africa, including the Cape Verde Islands. They are less widespread on the eastern side of Africa, but are known to live in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. These fish get around.

—Ed Mitchell

PHOTO: JIM LEVISON



The best way to release a false albacore is to plunge it headfirst into the water. This gives the fish a running start from which to accelerate. Don't just lay an albie in the water and let go.

of false albacore do the same thing. The lead fish approach the bait traveling side by side. This frontal assault may be only three or four fish wide, but any fly dropped just ahead of it usually gets eaten immediately.

Swim or Sink

ALBIES seem to have only two gears: cruising at a fair clip just under the surface, or rocketing through prey at breakneck speed. The reason they are rarely at rest is that, unlike nearly all other fish, albies lack swim bladders. A swim bladder is an internal gas balloon that allows a fish to control its density so that it can suspend in the water column. Since albies don't have this organ, it's literally sink or swim for them.

Not having a swim bladder has its positive points. Because albies need not adjust a swim bladder to change depth, they can move up and down in the water column at full throttle, much to an angler's dismay. One second they're on top, and the next second they're gone. It happens all the time, and it happens because that's how these ocean speedsters are built.

Sharp Eyesight

BEFORE we get to the forage, let me relay something I read regarding the false albacore's legendary eyesight. This report comes from Bermuda, one of the few spots where adult false albacore regularly operate in water of great depth. As the story goes, false albacore swimming more than 90 feet deep rose to the surface to attack plugs trolled behind a boat. Granted, these fish might also have heard the engines, but perhaps, as fly rodders have long believed, albies do indeed have eyes like eagles.

> "Albies do indeed have eyes like eagles."

Forage and Flies

RESEARCH in the southeastern Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico on the dining habits of false albacore found that 67 percent of their stomach contents was baitfish. No surprise there. And I don't think you'll be surprised to learn that albies exhibited a preference for oily baits. That's true of many predators, including striped bass and bluefish. In southern New England waters, that translates into a taste for small menhaden, bay anchovies, sand eels, and such. Most fly patterns for albies mimic the size and shape of those baits.

If baitfish made up 67 percent of the diet, what was the rest? Excellent question, and the answer might surprise you. The study found that invertebrates account for nearly all of the fish's remaining stomach contents. When you think of invertebrates, squid come

PHOTOS: ED MITCHELL

A little tunny's pectoral fins fold into indentations in its sides, reducing drag. Details like this help to make the fish so unusually fast—and so exciting to catch. No wonder they're called "ocean speedsters."

When it needs to put on speed, an albie can fold its dorsal fin flat, retracting it into a groove on its back. Its slick skin, almost devoid of scales, keeps turbulence to a minimum as the fish races forward. The fish are built for speed and power.

Tips for Little Tunny

- False albacore like bottom with structure and prefer a current to slack water. Rips, reefs, humps, jetties, inlets, and bars are likely spots.
- Watch for nervous water, a slick, or birds diving on bait. Then get into position quickly; if the fish come up, you want to be there.
- Given the power of false albacore and the likelihood of having to pump one up to the gunwale, I prefer a 10-weight rod. Less suffering on both ends of the stick.
- If albies are consistently coming to the surface, a clear intermediate line is super. But don't forget a fast-sinking line; day in and day out, they produce the most fish.
- I've never seen an albie run more than 150 yards. But if you hook one over 20 pounds or one you can't follow, you'll want 200 yards of backing, or even 250. Don't overfill your reel; you need clearance between the fly line and the frame. A pencil is a handy gauge. Without that clearance, you might jam the reel if you stack the line unevenly.
- Bass and blues stay up for a while, letting you fumble around and make a couple of false casts. But albies can come and go in a blur. A speedy delivery is imperative. Don't be surprised if the first angler to cast is the only one to hook up; it happens all the time.
- A quick delivery requires preparation. Stretch your line beforehand. While you're looking for action, have enough of the head out of the rod to facilitate a speedy shot. Even in a boat, consider using a stripping basket; it keeps your line ready to fly.
- I have used flies from 2 inches to 7 inches long riding hooks from size 4 to size 3/0. Most of the time, a 3- to 4-inch fly on a size 1 or 1/0 hook does the trick. When you're matching juvenile bay anchovies, a 2-inch fly is usually best.
- Albies have excellent vision, but I don't think they're exceptionally leader shy because they're so often aggressive. They charge the fly and pound it hard. So, 12- to 15-pound tippets usually work fine.
- Chumming isn't popular above the Mason Dixon line, but it works well in northern waters. And when the fish are spread out, chumming can save the day.
- When you release an albie, don't just lay it back in the water and let go. Drop the fish into the brine headfirst, so that it can take off running.

—Ed Mitchell

False Albacore

(Little tunny, Florida bonito)

first to mind, and squid did make up the bulk of that 33 percent. For that reason, large, squidlike streamers and more precise squid imitations can work magic at times.

But the research found something else, something very intriguing. False albacore also wolf down stuff small enough to qualify as plankton. And that small stuff was largely made up of one specific type of invertebrate: crab larvae.

Now, if you fish in my home waters of southern New England, that fact should set off bells and whistles. I believe it accounts for a good deal of the mysterious feeding behavior we see. You know what I mean: albies are right on top in plain view, obviously eating something, and yet they refuse every streamer thrown at them. That's because they're eating tiny crabs. And when that happens, streamer flies just don't cut it; the fish are fixated on those itty-bitty crab larvae. It's my belief that similarly small food is often to blame for the false albacores' refusal to eat flies that are known killers.

Deep at Times

BESIDES this plankton business, studies of the albie's diet revealed one other thing of interest to anglers. Because fly rodders target albies near the surface, many of them assume that false albacore do all their feeding there. When you don't see any albies on top, they're simply not around, says the conventional wisdom. Well, not true. Bottom-dwelling fish were also found in the stomachs of false albacore. Clearly, albies can feed right on the bottom at times.

Not sure you believe it? Divers have witnessed albies in the act. They report seeing false albacore drive a school of forage fish *down* and pin it to the bottom before blasting through it. These divers also reported actually hearing the albies' jaws clicking as they snapped up the bait. That must have been quite a sight!

Why So Powerful?

WHAT makes false albacore so swift, so powerful? For one thing, tunas swim funny. Most fish wiggle their way through the water, but not tuna. A tuna has a unique skeletal design that allows it to keep its body rigid and simply drive it ahead like a spear. That alone greatly reduces hydrodynamic drag, but there's more to the picture.

Like all tunas, false albacore have streamlined bodies shaped for speed. Moreover, nature has taken care of the details. Ever wonder about those small finlets along the top and bottom of an albie's caudal peduncle? All mackerel have them, and these little fins have a purpose: they lower the turbulence created by the fish's vibrating tail, making the propeller more efficient.

Albies are even slicker than most tunas, almost totally free of scales. That helps reduce turbulence along the body even further. Consider this, too: an albie's

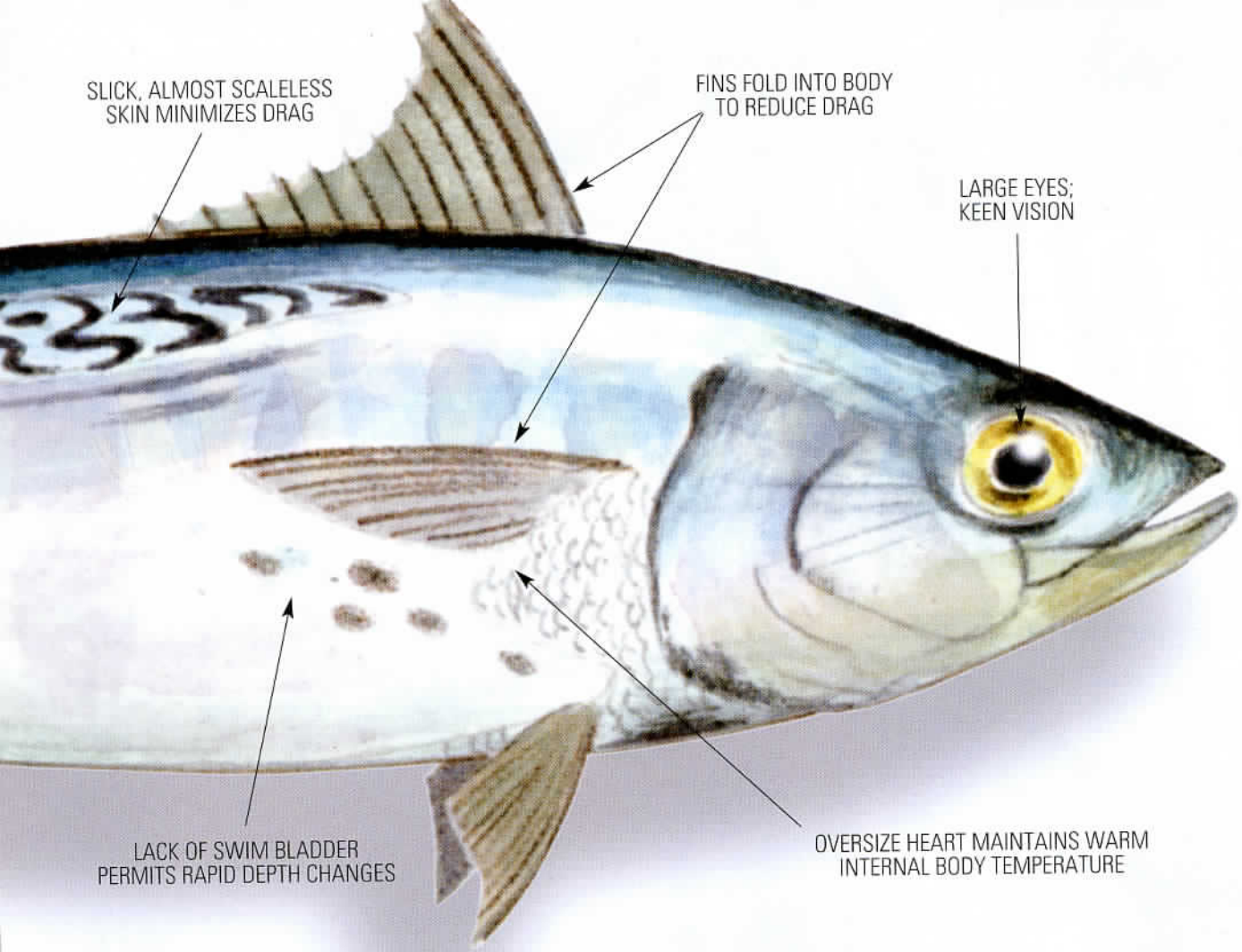


ILLUSTRATION: LARRY LARGAY

dorsal and pectoral fins are set up like the blades of a jack knife, able to fold in flat. That further reduces water resistance.

Streamlining alone, however, doesn't guarantee speed, any more than a Ferrari with a lawn-mower engine is going to smoke the tires. You need power, too, and tunas have plenty of it. They are high-energy, high-metabolism critters. The members of the mackerel family are the most muscle-packed fish on earth. As adults, 60 percent or more of their body weight is musculature. Those muscles are backed up by a heart that is huge in proportion to the body. Tunas are truly champion athletes among fish.

Now you have to deliver that power to the wheels, and here, too, nature has tended to the details. A tuna's caudal peduncle—the "wrist" of its tail—is a narrow, rigid bridge fully able to transmit all that muscle power to the tail. And when it needs to, an albie can beat its boomerang-shaped tail faster than a rock drummer can move his drumsticks during a head-banging solo.

Hot Bodies

As if all those physical attributes weren't enough, albies have one more ace up their fins. They have hot bodies. Nearly all fish are cold-blooded, unable to regulate their internal body temperatures. As a result, their strength and endurance are greatly affected by the temperature of the surrounding water. Below their preferred temperature ranges, most fish become sluggish. Not so with a false albacore, or with tunas in general. Scientific evidence indicates that a false albacore's body temperature can be 20 degrees warmer than the surrounding water. That internal heat increases both strength and endurance, although albies still have to eat a lot to maintain their high metabolisms.

Having a hot body may have two other advantages. The ability to control their internal temperature probably permits false albacore to rapidly change depth without being affected by changes in water temperature. And I bet that this temperature control gives them more latitude as water temperatures cool in the late fall. If bait is more than usually abundant during a particular year, albies can hang around longer and keep feeding even as dropping water temperatures drive other species south. Their hot bodies give them a little more control over their migrations.

False albacore are remarkable creatures, in many ways fundamentally different from striped bass, bluefish, weakfish, and other species. We're lucky that these special fish like to live where fly rodders can get at them.

Ed Mitchell, the author of Fly-Fishing the Saltwater Shoreline *and* Fly Rodding the Coast, *lives in Connecticut and has long been one of the East's most respected fly fishers.*