

FLYRODDING FOR YELLOWTAIL

by Greg Clarke

Most people wouldn't dream of using a flyrod for yellowtail, but given reasonable weather conditions they can be very efficient. There are a few places that one can try from the rocks, Rooikrans is a famous spinning area, but, for fly fishing, you may find you have a restricted backcast. Sunnycove, when the fish are in the bay and the wind is not too strong (early morning) is worth a try. The Rooiels coast can also produce fish, but note well the white crosses along the road. These are not for show. This is a VERY DANGEROUS area. Even when it's calm, the swells can rise to a horrifying height. NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON THE SEA.

The only limitation you will have is casting range. To achieve a reasonable distance a shooting head, mono running line and stripping basket are the way to go. To improve the odds even more in your favour, a boat is needed. If you don't have access to a boat in Cape Town you can contact Alan Stewart (Seeker) Tel. 405-5166 (w) 75-2533 (h). Alan is a very experienced fisherman, who uses a flyrod when conditions are suitable. He has caught more species on a flyrod than anyone else I know.

Some of the popular ways of catching yellowtail are 1. Trolling 2. Spinning and 3. Bait. As always, the most difficult part is finding the fish. The quickest way to solve this problem is with your maritime radio. Listen to what's going on around you. Another, more exciting way, is to look for birds working. When fish are feeding close to the surface the Sterrekies dive down to pick up bits of food. As they can't swim you know the fish are shallow, so don't delay, bung a popper or streamer into the action as fast as possible (before some twit trolls through the shoal and puts them down). Malgas (Gannets), on the other hand, don't need game fish to break up food, just to concentrate it. They dive below the surface and catch their own baitfish, so watch them – the higher they go before diving and the time they spend underwater, tells you how deep the baitfish are. This is Hi-speed, Hi-D or better still, leadcore shooting head territory.

If no bird or beast is out to help you, then go to Plan A.

Plan A: Trolling to find fish

The aim of trolling is to find fish and then hold them in range while you cast to them. To do this successfully you need to use fixed lines. A reel will give line to the fish but by the time you get the motors out of gear and make your cast they may be out of range. A simple setup is a couple of stout handlines behind the boat. One snag with this setup is that you don't always know when a fish is on. A more elaborate system is to use fixed lines, 10 to 15 m long and of 30 kg breaking strain. Where the line fastens to the boat a shock absorber of surgical rubber or a rubber tensioner (from Cape Town Rubber) is used. With surgical rubber you can use cable ties to form loops. Next, U bolts are put through the loops. One end fastens to the boat, the other has the nylon secured to it. Now pull on the rubber to get an idea of the amount of stretch, then fasten a short piece of nylon or trace wire between

the U bolts, allowing the rubber to absorb the shock of the fish taking. (See Fig. 1.) At the other end of the nylon a good quality black swivel is attached.

Now make up your traces. For these you can use the same nylon, but I suggest you also make up a few using lighter line (15 kg B/S), for when the fish are playing hard to get. Form the loop of your choice (Bimini Twist, Spider Hitch or Three Turn Watermans Knot), at one end of a two metre length of nylon. Now slide a green plastic skirt, followed by a yellow skirt and then a small ball sinker, up the line towards the loop, then tie on a 4/0 to 6/0 stainless steel hook. When the trace is complete, it should be between 1 and 1,2 m long. (See Fig. 1). By varying the size of your sinker you can change the action of the lure. A skirt that leaves a wake on the surface is, at times, very attractive to the fish. You will have to adjust the lines to suit your boat- you want the skirts on the edge of the wake at a slow troll. (See Fig. 1)

First up now gets ready to cast. If he or she is right handed, they take up position, Port side stern. Strip off 15m of line, pay it out over the side and then retrieve it back into your stripping basket. A WFST or SWT is called for. Floaters, intermediates or sinkers will all work. The SWT will be the easiest to cast. Hold as much of the weight forward section out of the rod tip as you can. If you are using a streamer, you can keep the fly in the water. A popper you will have to hold in your hand or it will twist your leader. The caster watches the lures, the helmsman must run the boat. Try to find somewhere to wedge yourself in, ready to cast.

In clear water you will see the fish come up behind the boat. Wait for one to take and if there is no splash you will see the shock absorber stretch. Tell the helmsman to put the boat into neutral and at the same time get your line in the air. Make one or two backcasts and throw the fly to the milling fish. Shoot the line from your basket, allowing it to run through your stripping hand. The line should be straight when it hits the water. Start stripping immediately. The boat will coast forward a few metres which will help with your retrieve. If all goes according to plan on the third or fourth pull you will be IN! (Fig. 2)

Set the hook with a side-strike using rod and body, then hold the fish with minimum tension, while the helmsman retrieves the fish and lines from the water. Now you are ready to do battle. Normally the hooked fish will stay with his mates until you put the pressure on. Then – look out – he's going straight for the bottom.

A couple of tips on trolling. If the breeze is fresh, run across or upwind – it will make casting easier. Yellowtail, if in the bay, can be caught from Rooiels, Gordons Bay, the Strand and Strandfontein around to Muizenberg corner and, from there, all the way to Cape Point. Outside, the Anvil, Bellows and South West Reef are all good spots. These areas are the boatfisherman's Rooiels. The helmsman MUST WATCH THE SEA at all times in all but the calmest of conditions.

Before we go any further, lets look at Plan B; a most exciting pastime, chasing after birds with rod in hand and your fly at the ready.

Plan B: Casting to surface feeders

To have a day out on the water with the Yellowtail taking freely on the surface is a salt flyrodder's Eldorado. The sight of these magnificent gamefish breaking surface on the feed, the screeching of the excited birds as they dip down to pick up scraps, is enough to make an Egyptian mummy's pulse race. On days like these you will have no trouble in locating your quarry – just follow the birds.

It is important to approach the shoal from the correct angle. Don't go through the birds – fish the edges. (Fig. 3.)

If you fish under I.G.F.A. rules your motors must be in neutral before you cast. Think about how the boat will drift. Ideally you want it to move down the edge of the shoal, giving you and your crew more than one shot at the fish. By altering the angle of your motors, you can to a certain extent control the angle that your boat takes to the wind. Experiment – each boat is different. If that doesn't work you can always put out a sea anchor. As you are in a boat, distance is not a problem – but time is. This is where a flyrod comes into its own. Loaded with a SWT Floater or Intermediate you can trail the fly behind the boat as you approach the shoal. As soon as you are close enough to signal for neutral, push the rod forward to load against the water tension, make a haul with your stripping hand and at the same time accelerate and stop the rod in a high finish. (Fig. 4).

MAKING UP TRACES

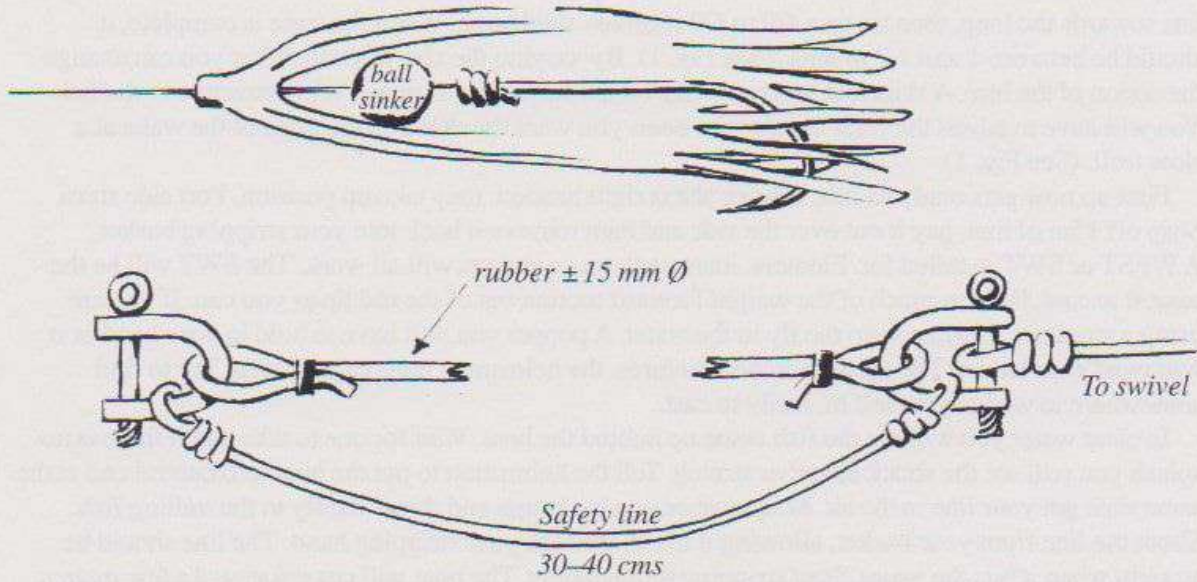


Figure 1

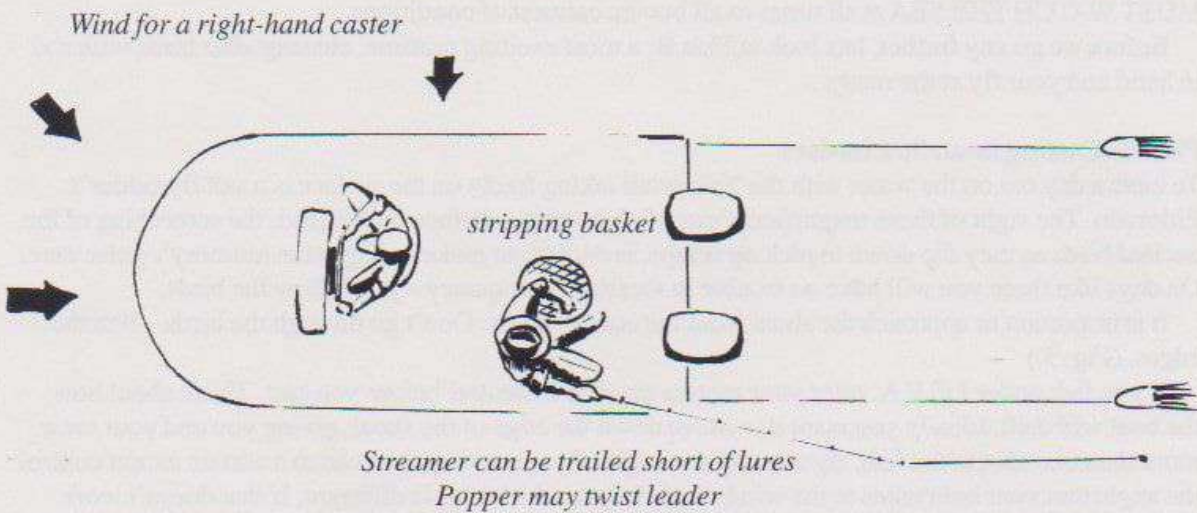


Figure 2

WIND

Never run through the shoal
You will put the fish down

Centre console can cast from bow A
Cabin must cast from stern B

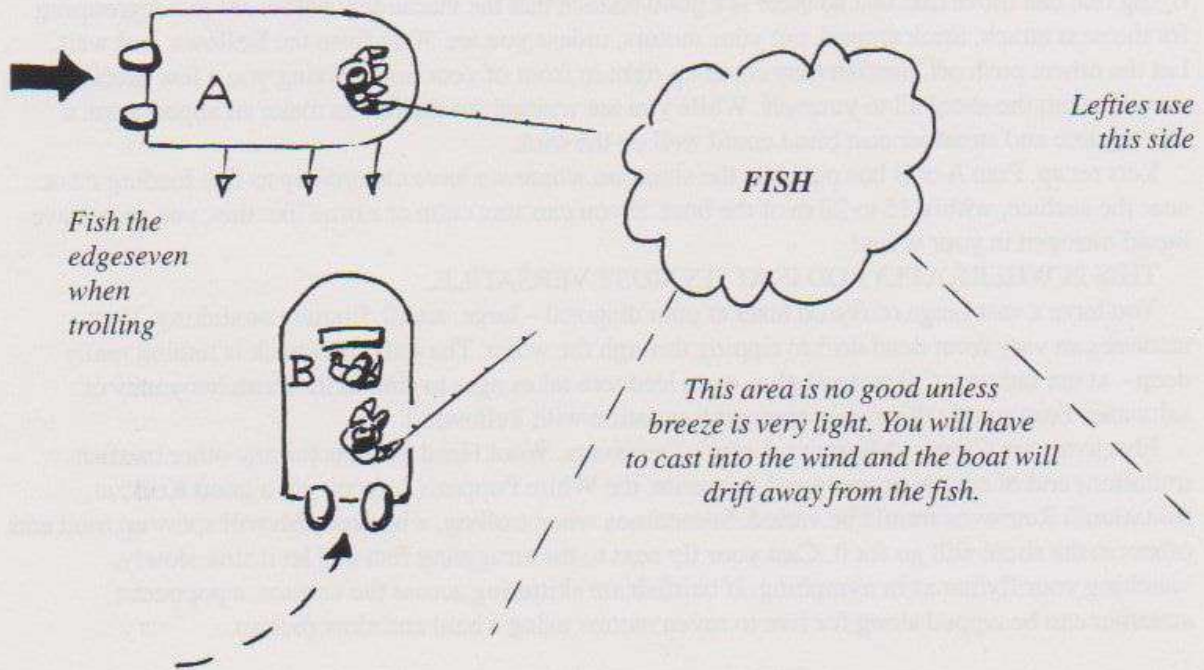


Figure 3

The longer you can move the rod
the easier it will be to load

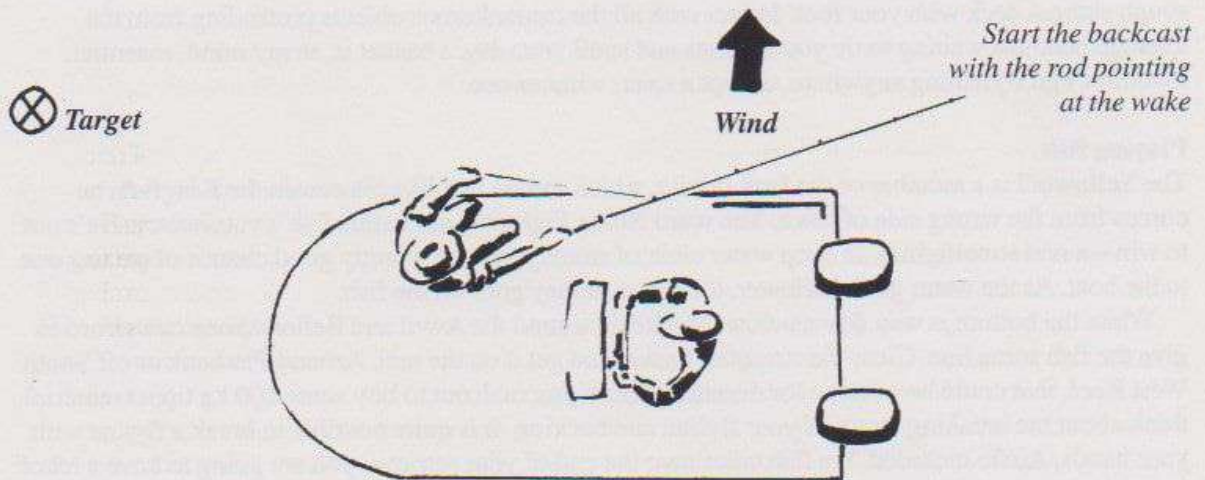


Figure 4

Using this technique you can shoot quite a bit of line and be in action before the helmsman can even pick up his rod. If there are lots of boats about you need to be quick to get a fly in before somebody trolls through the shoal.

Birds, the fickle creatures that they are, will often flit from one pod of fish to the other. This can be very frustrating. As you arrive on the scene, the birds lift off and start working 300 m away. Not even flying fish can move that fast so there is a good chance that the marauders below are just regrouping for the next attack. Stick around, cut your motors, unless you are 50 m from the Bellows, and wait. Let the others push off, the fish may come up right in front of your nose, giving you a few precious minutes with the shoal all to yourself. While you are waiting for the fish to make an appearance, a sinking line and streamer cast blind could well do the trick.

Lets recap. Plan A or B has put us in the situation where we have charged up to fish feeding on or near the surface, within 15 to 20 m of the boat. If you can stay calm at a time like this, you must have liquid nitrogen in your veins!

THIS IS WHERE A FLYROD IS AT ITS MOST VERSATILE.

You have a vast range of flyrod lures at your disposal – large, small, floating or sinking. Your retrieve can vary from dead drift to ripping through the water. The only drawback is fishing really deep – at ten fathoms (30 metres) plus, even leadcore takes ages to sink in the extra buoyancy of saltwater. Fortunately this rarely enters the equation with Yellowtail.

Flys to try are Clouser Minnows, Lefty's Deceivers, Wool Head Mulletts (or any other baitfish imitation) and of course my personal favourite, the White Popper. (Anyone got a good Krill imitation?) Retrieves should be varied. Sometimes when trolling, a hooked fish will spew up food and others in the shoal will go for it. Cast your fly next to the struggling fish and let it sink slowly, watching your flyline as in nymphing. If baitfish are skittering across the surface, a popper or streamer can be zipped along for five to seven metres using a haul and slow pickup.

Casting

ALWAYS CAST FROM THE DOWN WIND (LEE) SIDE OF THE BOAT WITH YOUR ROD OVER THE WATER. Big flies make big holes.

If more than one person wishes to fish they must cast and move upwind, or if trolling into the wind with right hand casters, after casting move to starboard. (Fig. 5)

Another point to keep in mind is the direction of the cast. Down wind is very tempting but as the boat is drifting that way you will have to retrieve like hell to get the fly to move. Upwind also has its problems. To my mind, the best is down and across. To cast across the wind, try to position yourself so that you are able to cover the target area from this angle. It will soon become obvious that if you want to go walkabout you need a stripping basket. One of the easiest ways to ruin a flyline is to trap it on a rough skiboat deck with your foot. In fact with all the cantankerous objects protruding from the average boat just waiting to tie you in knots and spoil your day, a basket is, to my mind, essential. I wouldn't go flyfishing anywhere, except a river, without one.

Playing fish

The Yellowtail is a member of the Jack family, which means that like his cousin the Kingfish, he comes from the wrong side of town. The word Noble Fighter is not in this fish's vocabulary. He's out to win – a real streetfighter. In deep water clear of snags you have a pretty good chance of getting one to the boat. As the water gets shallower, the smart money goes on the fish.

When the bottom is way down below your keel (around the Anvil and Bellows) one can afford to give the fish some line. Clear the stripping basket and get it on the reel. Around Platbank or off South West Reef, that could be a recipe for disaster. Before you rush out to buy some 100 kg tippet material, think about the breaking strain of your flyline and backing. It is quite possible to break a flyline with your hands, Airflo included. If a fish takes near the end of your retrieve, you are going to have a lot of loose line in your basket and will probably not be able to play it off the reel. You will not often have to test your line to backing splice, using a 33m flyline assuming the fish goes straight down, in the shallower areas. To take it all he will need a spade. It will be give and take from your basket. Pray the line doesn't tangle and be a hog – take more than you give. Once, off McLears, I was getting smashed up every time in the kelp. Eventually in desperation I just pointed the rod straight down at the fish and

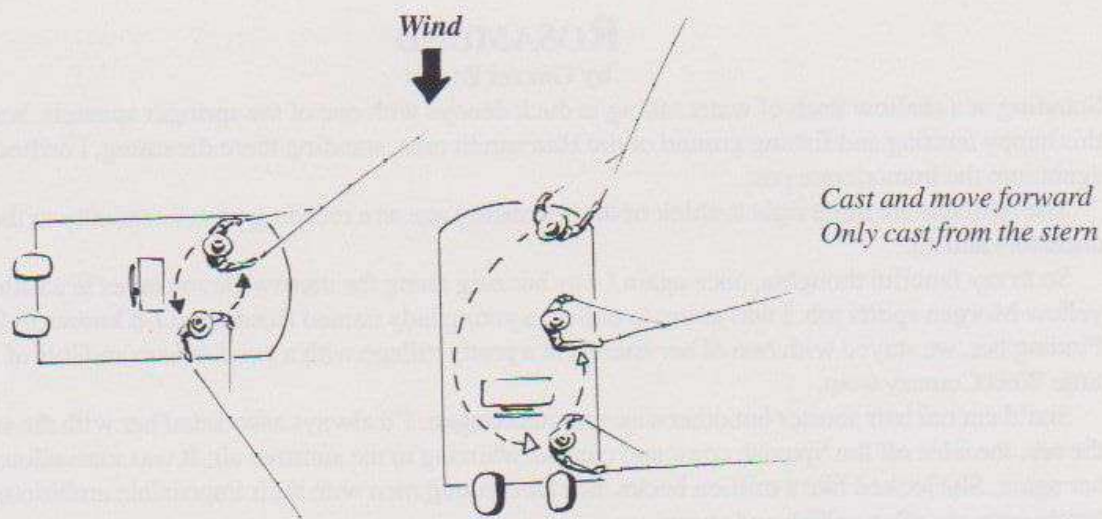


Figure 5

held on. The 3 kg Yellowtail was unable to break the 5.5 kg tippet. Don't be tempted to use thin, high strength nylon – it has no scuff resistance. Maxima is great stuff. I once landed a 6 kg Leerie on a 5.5 kg tippet with a wind knot in it – and I pressure my fish.

Backing is even weaker – 20 lb class is designed to break at about 18 lbs. So, if you choose to use 15 lb nylon for your tippet, which most of the time is guaranteed to part at more than the stated breaking strain, you have a good chance of losing your flyline. For heavier tippets, 30 lb backing is a safer bet.

As your playing field will resemble a lift shaft, forget the Down and Dirty's and the Side Strains. Just try to lift the fish and keep it off the bottom. As you will be putting serious strain on your ferrule, arms and back, this is when it's nice to have a fore grip and a guarantee. Let's be positive, when you get the fish in sight you can try all the fancy techniques. Go easy in the beginning and you won't even see it. With your quarry in mid water, slow down your pulse rate but be ready to speed it up when the fish is next to the boat. Watch out for sudden surges, be ready to drop the rod and release line. If you are going to keep the fish, gaff it. To release it, grab its propeller.

Tackle

RODS. 9/10 WT is about the minimum one would choose. Down at Muizenberg over sand, one may get away with a lighter stick.

REELS. Buy the best you can afford. They are never going to get any cheaper and, with care, will last a lifetime.

FLYLINES. Weight Forwards or Shooting Heads, Floaters Intermediates or Sinkers – even Lead Cores, all have their uses. If you have Double Tapers heavy enough, you can cut them to make good shooting heads. Running lines that work well are the Airflo Intermediate line or 30/40 kg nylon. Make sure you give the nylon a good stretch before you start casting.

BACKING. 30 lb

LEADERS. Maxima up to 10 kg. Practise your knots.

STRIPPING BASKET. You will have to make your own. Take a plastic basin and drill some small holes on the bottom about the thickness of the nylon you are going to use. Cut enough lengths of nylon and melt one end to form a blob. Put some slow drying epoxy on the holes, turn the basin upside down and drop the nylon through the holes. Use nylon about 75 mm long of 40/50 kg BS. When the glue is dry, devise a way of fastening the basket to your waist.

Other items you need are polaroid sunglasses, a hat and a good UV sunblock.

One of the great things about saltwater flyrodding is the quality of the fishing. You can go out and catch a couple of fish (if you're lucky) and feel you have had a great day, whereas catching the same fish on a handline would be over so quickly that most people wouldn't be satisfied. In short, a great way of savouring one's fishing without putting too much pressure on the resource.

Good luck! I hope to see you out there this coming season.