

# Yellowtail Hunting Techniques

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This paper discusses some well tested hunting techniques to use when you are hunting yellowtail (YT). These techniques will help you bring YT in close enough for a good shot. That is, unless the fish has met a blue water hunter before.

Endorsement from fellow Fathomier, René Rojas, two time world record holder of the Yellowtail and past U.S. National Spearfishing Team Champion for multiple years:

*“You are doing a very good job writing on the techniques that our spearfishing community has accumulated through the years of hunting this fish which is one of our more available targets here in Southern California. It is going to be a great source of information for beginning and advanced divers as well. I like to see that you included one of the most important issues -- after you made your capture, how to best keep the quality and freshness of the fish for latter consumption.”*

1) When and where to hunt YT? The very first rule of thumb for hunting YT is look for warm water. YT season seems to start in Southern California when the water temperature hits 64 degrees. This usually happens in the first two weeks of June at Catalina Island. YT prefer 70 degree and above water so when you see these temperatures you know you are in the peak of the season. Other keys to finding YTs are to look for current and the bait feeding in that current. Current is often increased during full moon and no moon cycles so I prefer to hunt YT during these stronger tides and currents. Now that you have warm water and some current it is time to look for potential YT spots by finding their bait. Look for major points, reefs, deep water kelp beds and pinnacles. Focus most of your attention on the up current end or the out side of these places. This is where you will find the bait. Place yourself on the front line of the bait or even in front of the bait. The best baits are mackerel and anchovies. Blacksmith, blue perch and top smelt are not prime bait for hunting YT but if you are in this area you should be able to find prime bait fish. If you are lucky enough to find flying fish stay in that area, they are probably the very best. When you find some bait, hang there a bit to see how nervous & tight they are. Real nervous & real tight are good indicators the YTs and perhaps other game fish are about. Bait fish with chunks missing and fresh white flesh showing is a really good sign too. Sleepy, happy bait fish sluggishly moving around and widely spread apart is a sign to move on to another dive location.

2) What is the best method to hunt for YT? Should you dive down to hunt, and if so, how deep? Or, should you stay on the surface and then dive when you see them? This is a complicated issue to discuss and it has a lot of factors that you need to assess to make your decision. If you are a beginner diver and can't hold your breath for a long time and can't do repeat dives all day long then the surface method is ok, especially if there is good visibility - over 25 feet. Also, if you are in very good visibility and can see over 60 feet, plus you can see the bottom, then hunting from the surface is a very good method but it isn't the

best way to hunt them. The most effective way to hunt for YT is to go down to their level and search for them. This maximized their ability to see you and your ability to see them. It then allows you to use the knowledge that you will learn below to call them in. The "Keep It Simple Stupid" (KISS) approach is to simply dive down to 15 to 30 feet and hang there doing your scanning and not moving much. A more advance approach is to assess what depth the fish are swimming at and then go to the depth where the fish are. I estimate the level they are at by checking out the bait and looking for other predators. If the bait is in the top 10 feet then the predators are often found at the bottom of the bait or 10 feet below them. Another good way is to look for other predators especially the barracuda. They will usually hold at the same depth. Bait, water temperature, visibility and thermo clines all play a factor in what depth the YT are at. Bonitos are not a good fish to assess the depth of YT since bonitos often run just below the surface, however they are a very good sign that YT are near. YT will often be below or behind the school of bonitos and sometimes they can be seen running with the bonitos.

3) Scanning while you hunt. When diving in blue water you need to set up a visual scanning pattern that is different than most other types of hunting. I try to make sure I keep turning my head so that I cover all directions slowly and constantly and I keep my eyeballs moving and scanning at a higher rate than my head turning. You need to look all around you as best you can. Don't move fast or you will scare the fish away before you see them. These fish know when you can see them and when you can't. They really like coming up from behind you. They don't like being stared at and they don't like being lunged at so don't move fast and don't try to stare them down. If you are doing your scanning right, you'll have a tired neck by the end of the day.

Here is a tip from JOHN IWANIEC, Fathomier since 1999 and a National Team Champion:

*"AS YOU MENTIONED, SCANNING IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT, WHAT I NEVER UNDERSTOOD IS WHY MORE PEOPLE DON'T WEAR WRAP AROUND MASKS WITH SIDE VIEWS ESPECIALLY WHEN HUNTING YELLOWS. TODAY'S WRAP AROUNDS ARE LOW VOLUME ENOUGH TO MONOPOLIZE ON THAT EXTRA VISION. I CANT BEGIN TO TELL YOU HOW MANY FISH I HAVE GOTTEN BY USING A MASK WITH SIDE VIEWS THAT I WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE MISSED; ALSO IT KEEPS YOU FROM HAVING TO TURN YOUR HEAD SO MUCH."*

4) If you are diving down and see a YT or school you can choose to either employ the tricks discussed below or just hold still. Fish that are for some reason really scared will not fall for tricks but may actually come in closer to a diver if you are not moving. A general rule to follow is to hold still if the fish are coming towards you. If the fish are not looking interested in you and are about to move further away then consider employing the tricks discussed below. This is a judgment call you will have to make.

5) When lining up for a shot on a YT, try to shoot for their eye or gill plate or even a few inches in front of them if they are moving fast. Getting a head shot of a YT is hard so don't be surprised if they don't let you move your gun forward of their mid section. They don't

seem to like having guns pointed at their heads -- they learn this in school. These fish are so fast that from the time you pull your trigger to the time the shaft gets to them you almost always hit them eight inches behind your aim point - usually striking them in the back half. This is not a good place to start a fight. I have not yet hit a YT in front of the gill slit because they are that smart and fast to react and move. If you can aim 4 inches in front of their eye then you may hit them in the head. Remember, the longer the shot the more the fish will move and the more your shaft will sink leaving you with a belly shot and that often results in a lost fish. I find it hard to shoot in front of them unless they are already moving at high speeds or it is a long shot. A head shot is great because the closer your shot is to their head the better control you will have in the fight. It is hard for a fish to run deep if you hold their head up. You have no control of direction when a fish is shot in the back half. Don't let the fish run deep and hang up. That is a good way to lose the fish or worse, your life as my fellow Fathomier, Steve Redding did.

6) Use a slip tip for all your game fish hunting! In my opinion, the main reason one uses a slip tip is so the fish does not have the shaft mass and leverage to fight against which, in turn, rips a huge hole through the fish. Then the point comes out and all you have left is a fish story and a bent shaft to show for it. You have also killed a beautiful animal and lost it to the sea - don't dishonor these beautiful fish by hunting them with the wrong equipment. The smaller lighter shafts and a single flopper are for small fish but when you move over to bigger shafts, 5/16, 11/32, and 3/8 shafts, and especially targeting larger more powerful fish it is much wiser to go with a good slip tip. The Euro guns often come with a light shaft and a single flopper. This is because they usually hunt small fish which are often in caves. This point is very effective in that situation and is easily to remove from caves and quick to get out of fish with the proper technique. Sure, a great shot will hold any fish but I assure you that you will lose more game fish with a single flopper or a fixed point than you will with a good slip tip. Spectra will give you the best chance of not cutting through the fish's meat and is very effective on yellowtail size game fish. Cable should be used for grouper and reef fish in rocks but is also ok to use as long as it is coated.

7) For spear fishing YT, the best technique is to be a silent and still hunter and if that doesn't appear to be working then nothing beats noise to get them to come to you. The yellowtail's weak spot is their curiosity; learn to use this to your advantage. Yellowtails often like to investigate vibrations, colors & sound. Even when they are not hungry, they're almost always curious. After using either stealth or noise to attract the fish as close as possible and if the fish still isn't close enough to shoot then try moving parallel to them and then swing your gun slowly toward them. Don't move directly at the fish. Make them think you are swimming along with them or in the same general direction they are swimming in but don't swim or move any part of your body directly at them.

8) Another way to hunt for YT is to go Paddy Jumping. In California, paddies can often be found down current from islands during the Summer and early Fall. Paddies that are less than a mile from the island or coast seldom have fish on them. If the paddy doesn't have bait swimming around it then don't bother to jump in. Bait columns can often go from the surface to out of sight depths. When paddy jumping, I suggest you load your gun before getting in the water. The fish and sharks will come up to you very fast so be ready from the

second you enter the water. For paddy jumping to work well the water usually needs to be warm, above 73 degrees. The game fish, when they are not feeding, may be circling the paddy as far away as 200 yards so don't just look under the paddy. Come in on the paddy slowly with your depth meter on looking for the school of game fish and leave the same way. My experience is that there is usually game fish on one out of seven paddies, assuming all conditions are favorable. Don't give up on paddies after checking just 2 - 3 of them.

9) Now that you are in prime YT bait what do you do? Watch for the bait to start running for cover then turn yourself to face in the direction they are running from and get your gun lined up fast, before the predator gets there. If it is a shark you are ready and if it is a YT then you can hold still and wait until the fish presents itself for a shot. You don't want to be swinging your gun when fish are approaching because that may frighten them away.

10) Weighting yourself to be neutrally buoyant at the depth you are hunting at is very important. You do not want to be kicking to stay down or to keep from sinking when smart game fish are around. Motion can scare fish and should be used only when you want to employ some of the advanced methods discussed in this paper. Have you ever noticed that sometimes you see predators swimming among their happy little bait fish friends and the bait fish don't seem to care or worry about them and then at other times you see predators coming in to a school and the school is swimming for their lives, going as fast as bats out of hell? This is because the smaller fish know when the larger fish are in the "predator" mode. How do they know this? It is by the way the bigger fish are moving. If they are moving fast, they are coming to eat and if they are moving slow they are full and "friendly". Some fish have color changes when they are in the predator mode and that is cool to see too. Now, start thinking like a fish and make yourself look like a non-predator. Be still or move slowly and look friendly, no - you don't have to smile but don't stare at them either until you are ready to line up your shot. Then slowly squeeze the trigger and let the spear fly. You will catch the fish by surprise. Remember, the bigger the fish the more excited you tend to be. The more excited you are the more likely you will jerk the trigger and miss the fish. For an accurate shot, squeeze the trigger and never jerk it.

11) Strum your rubber bands, which when done right, sends out wave lengths (vibrations) like the quivering muscles of a fighting fish through the water and this rings the dinner bell for predators. In shark infested waters, you may want to think twice about this method since I had an 18 foot giant hammerhead come in on me from well over 200 yards away the instant I strummed my bands while at 30 feet down! But that is another story.

12) I like using Home Depot's blue and white rubber/cloth gloves (size large comes in these colors) and when I see a shy YT, I shake my flat hand back and forth hard to simulate a fighting fish. I choose these colors because blue and white colors are some of their favorite lures colors. This motion, combined with the colors, calls them in for a meal and a sure shot. You have got to try this glove trick. It works great and is my own creation.

13) Use your zipper to make noise - I don't know what the YT thinks this sounds like but I bet the YT doesn't either and that is way they come to investigate. The technique here is to

quickly zip and unzip your suit, assuming you have a front zipper on your jacket, while you are diving and looking for YT. This sound drives them crazy.

14) In deep water, over 60 feet, dive down to 30 feet and level out horizontally. Then kick your fins HARD, making pressure waves to simulating a fighting fish, rapid quick fin kicks followed by a few strong kicks and moving forward. Repeat this 3-4 dives in an area. I usually get them to come into view by the second dive. After the last hard kick, look back over your shoulder and the yellows most often appear right on the tips of your fins. Then swim away from them fast for a few strokes allowing your gun point to move backwards and roll-up while turning and your gun should be pointing at there noses. Pick one out & fire. This method works well when you are metering fish deeper than you can dive. It will bring them up to investigate the commotion.

15) When on the surface, slap your fin by lifting it up in the air and bring it down hard and flat. This sound is thought to simulate that of a diving pelican hitting bait and can sometimes bring YT up for a look and thinking it is time for an easy meal. Yes, it really works.

16) My easiest and perhaps the most effective trick is to croak, mimicking the distress call of a sargo. To figure out the sound they make shoot one of them in the back half and listen to their distress call. It is a hard sound to describe but an easy sound to make in the back of your throat.

17) "I like hunting for YT during the last hour of daylight, during what I call the predator hour. I find the fish are lurking in the deeper darker waters below the bait. They use the remaining light to silhouette the bait above and then rise up and strike them. To hunt these fish you must be diving down to their depth or below since looking down on the fish with their dark backs make them impossible to see at this time of day." By Frederic Doucedame, one of my favorite dive partners.

18) One young diver that I was with was lining up on his first ever YT while diving 30 feet down and just before he could get his gun on target the fish turned and left. He was so mad that he let out a huge scream and lots of bubbles in frustration. The scream & bubbles got the attention of the YT and it returned. The shot was a hit but because he had let out so much air screaming he couldn't stay down and fight the fish from going down and tying up. He ended up losing this fish. He screamed again but this time to no avail. Screaming & bubbles can work but don't let out too much air for it really shortens your down time for that dive. I learned that day that laughing hard at rookies does too.

19) If you are diving with a rookie and really want to get him a fish then you may want to give this method a try ... Dive right next to each other when going for YT and then if you see a nice mid size fish like a sargo or calico shoot that fish in the meaty area then let it fight at about 20 feet deep. Hopefully the commotion will call in the bigger predators. Then your rookie can shoot the YT or WSB that comes in to investigate. This is especially effective where the bottom is deep like at the quarry since the YT may be sitting down deep in the area. This will bring them up for a shot. It may bring

a bigger predator than you want so you better trust your rookie to back you up since he has the only loaded gun.

20) After you subdue the fish, how should you kill it to maximize the taste and freshness of this great fish? Here is the method I use. **Note:** *If you are worried about sharks and sea lions taking your fish then this is not be the method you want to employ.* As soon as I shoot the fish, I pull out my knife and when I reach my YT, I slice both sides of the fish's gills. This makes the fish bleed out nearly all it's blood. Do this while it's heart is still pumping and don't pith the fish to kill it unless you are worried about losing the fish because the point is about to fall out. Bleeding the fish is essential since the fish's urine and acid from the fight is stored in it's blood. Blood is what makes the fish taste fishy and gamey and blood is what spoils the fish's meat the fastest. After I make the gill cuts, I start swimming the fish back to the boat or kayak. I string it and then reload my gun and get it ready to defend myself or shoot a curious onlooker. Next, I slice up the belly from the anal opening all the way to the chin keeping the knife on the centerline for easy cutting and using the serrated side. I take out all the guts and then cut along the inside backbone to remove the blood sacks found there. I also take out the gills, and proceed to scale it using the serrated side of the knife. If I need to save space in the ice chest, I cut off the head and tail while at the swim step. I then toss the fish on blocks of ice that I froze in plastic cartons. I don't let the fish touch fresh water since fresh water will speed up the decay process. I scale the fish mainly to de-slime it. The slime also is fast to start the decay process and stinks up the ice chest and my lunch/drinks that are in it. The gills and guts were taken out because they decay quickly too and make the meat taste bad. This method will keep your fish extremely fresh and truly sushi quality. If you keep the fish cold it should last you for a minimum of five days.

DONT FORGET THE OLDEST RULE IN DIVING:  
FIRST GUY IN THE WATER USUALLY GETS THE FIRST FISH!

ALSO,

DON'T FORGET THE SECOND OLDEST RULE IN DIVING: LET THE BOAT OWNER GET  
IN FIRST OR YOU WON'T BE INVITED BACK ON THE BOAT.

I hope these techniques will help you get a lot of fresh tasty yellowtail to eat.

## Preparation Ideas for Your Yellowtail

Now that you have shot your yellowtail, what's next? I am going to assume you know how to cut up a fish. Here are some recipes to try:

### Yellowtail Sashimi Recipes

1) Mix Tiger Sauce (an off the shelf product from Louisiana found in your local super market) with a little bit of soy sauce and sesame seed oil. Fillet the choice cut of yellowtail from the fish (the belly meat is the best when the fish is thick enough - 15 pounds and up).

Be sure to trim off all the dark meat first. For the best tasting fish, bleed the fish by cutting the gills before you finish the kill. Slice the flanks or belly into strips and let the pieces soak in the Tiger sauce mixture for about 20 minutes while chilling on ice or in a refrigerator. It doesn't have to be for a very long time. The meat will soak up a lot if left to sit too long. Slice into thin bite size pieces. Eat and enjoy.

*Recipe provided by Joe Kalohi.*

2) Chill the meet and then thinly slice 1" squares by ¼ inch thick slices off the choice cuts (shoulder and belly meat versus tail section) of yellowtail. Be sure to trim off all the dark meat. Dip the fish in a mixture of soy sauce and green wasabi paste. The more paste you put in the hotter it gets! Recommend you eat this while drinking plenty of beer or saki. Some like their yellowtail with just soy sauce. Lite soy sauce is a wise choice for your health.

### **Yellowtail on the BBQ**

1) If raw fish doesn't sound good to you then you can BBQ your YT. Here it the recipes I use. Soak the YT in Teriyaki sauce (many varieties and some with added flavors like pineapple are available) and place on the BBQ. Cook for the very minimum amount of time that it takes to turn the fish meat to a cooked color. Some folks like to marinate the fish for hours (up to 6) and others for just a few minutes. Ten to twenty minutes works for me. I often use the tail section for the BBQ and the prime cuts for the sushi.

2) Marinate your YT for 15 minutes in Paul Newman's Own salad dressing called Balsamic Vinaigrette, then cook it on the BBQ. Cook until the middle just starts to change colors. Use tinfoil or a fish flipper cage to cook the fish in. You may also want to cook this fish over soaked wood chips for a great smoked flavor - yum 😊

### **Cevichi**

This works well for taking it with you on a dive trip and having fresh fish for your ride home.

#### **Bag One:**

Juice from 4 to 6 limes & 4 lemons (option is 8 limes)

Add seasoning to the juice as desired (season salt, pepper, hot spices, your choice)

2 cloves of garlic crushed (optional and debated if it is better or not)

#### **Bag Two:**

Dices 8 – 12 tomatoes, Roma preferred (optional - take out the seeds)

One small bunch of Cilantro, chopped

1/2 white or red onion, chopped

Cucumber (optional) chopped

Chill bags 1 & 2 and go hunting for the fresh raw fish to add. When you get the fish, chop it into quarter inch chunks and add to bag 1 for 2 hours minimum while keeping it on ice. Then drain off excess juice and combine bags 1 & 2. Serve with your favorite Mexican style chips.

This recipe and idea comes from Fathomier Mark Navas (mostly) so I thank him for his idea and help. Hope you all enjoy this. Remember, the belly meet from large YT is perhaps the best fish to use. Most any fish can be used in this recipe.

**Fresh Yellowtail on the Boat's Grill**

Base the YT with olive oil and then spray on some butter (comes in pump spray) and add lemon pepper to taste. Then BBQ the fish on the back of the boat using the grill. Add season salt just as the fish is finishing cooking. Thank Gary Jones for this one.

**Please send me your suggestions for this paper and any recipes. I'll continue to update and publish this paper as I learn more.**

Cheers and Good Safe Hunting,  
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*P.S. Ask me about my halibut hunting paper, my presentation on Survival Techniques for the Underwater Hunter and my full fish recipes listing too.*