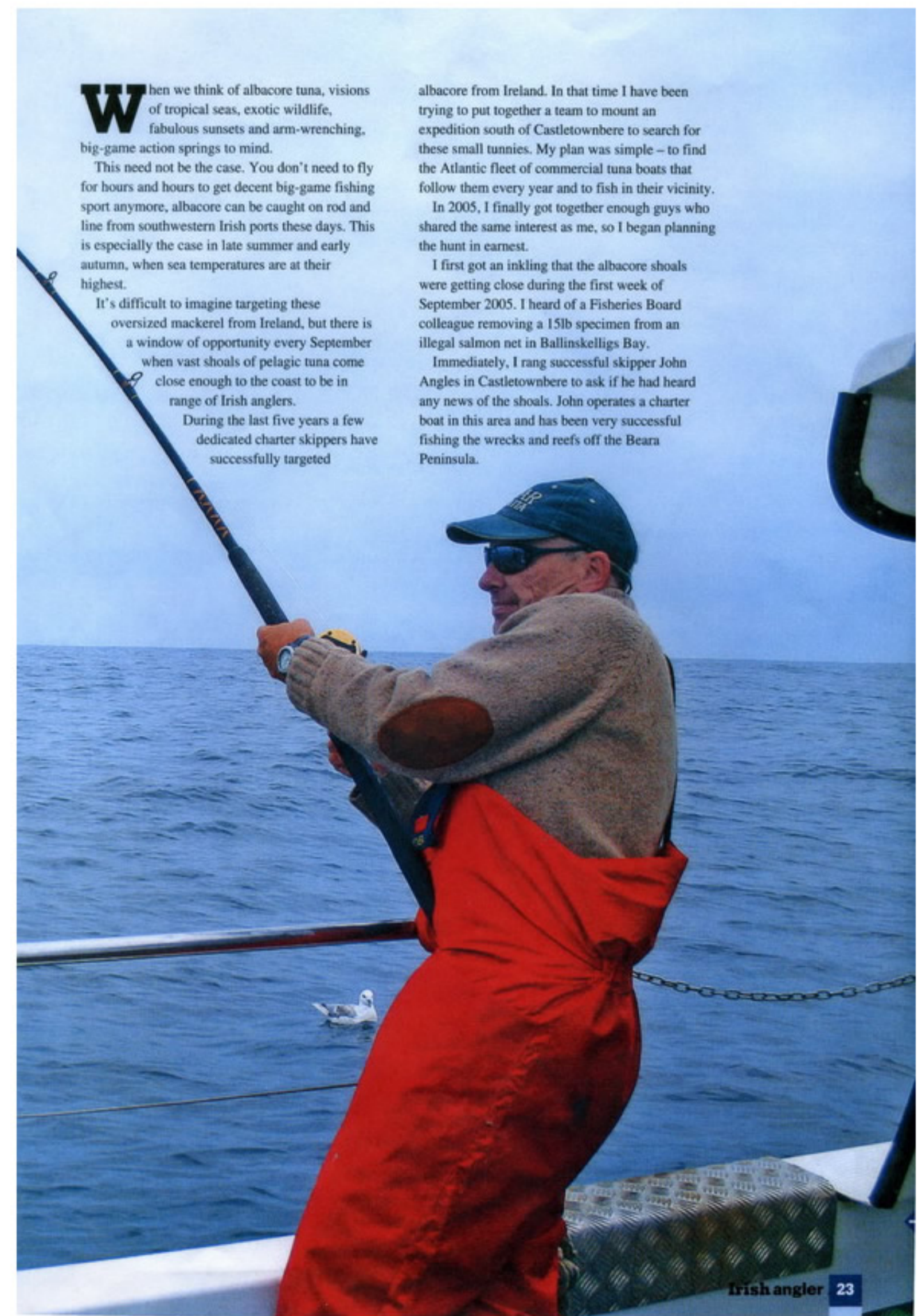


Tuna Quest!

Mike Hennessy fishes 30 miles offshore in search of albacore tuna. But things don't go quite to plan and he ends up catching a big pollack instead!

Fish on... but it's not a tuna, unfortunately!



When we think of albacore tuna, visions of tropical seas, exotic wildlife, fabulous sunsets and arm-wrenching, big-game action springs to mind.

This need not be the case. You don't need to fly for hours and hours to get decent big-game fishing sport anymore, albacore can be caught on rod and line from southwestern Irish ports these days. This is especially the case in late summer and early autumn, when sea temperatures are at their highest.

It's difficult to imagine targeting these oversized mackerel from Ireland, but there is a window of opportunity every September when vast shoals of pelagic tuna come close enough to the coast to be in range of Irish anglers.

During the last five years a few dedicated charter skippers have successfully targeted

albacore from Ireland. In that time I have been trying to put together a team to mount an expedition south of Castletownbere to search for these small tunnies. My plan was simple – to find the Atlantic fleet of commercial tuna boats that follow them every year and to fish in their vicinity.

In 2005, I finally got together enough guys who shared the same interest as me, so I began planning the hunt in earnest.

I first got an inkling that the albacore shoals were getting close during the first week of September 2005. I heard of a Fisheries Board colleague removing a 15lb specimen from an illegal salmon net in Ballinskelligs Bay.

Immediately, I rang successful skipper John Angles in Castletownbere to ask if he had heard any news of the shoals. John operates a charter boat in this area and has been very successful fishing the wrecks and reefs off the Beara Peninsula.

Sea Fishing

He said that the word locally was that Spanish commercial tuna boats were harvesting the main shoals 80 miles south of Dursey Island, but stragglers would be much closer in than that. With this in mind, and with a surge of excitement, I booked the boat for the following week.

I had no problem putting an angling crew together, and on the morning of September 11th we gathered at 6am on the main pier in the eager anticipation of landing the first albacore tuna of 2005 from Castletownbere.

With me on the trip were Patrick Buck and Leslie Payne, fellow employees of the South Western Regional Fisheries Board. We also had with us Bill Emery, the sea angling representative to the South Western Board, and Daniel Moore.

The weather was fantastic, with clear skies and very little wind – ideal conditions for travelling offshore. But were the tuna gods going to smile on us? It certainly looked like they were.

As John tied his boat to the pier, five anglers discussing tuna tactics and wildly displaying huge pink and purple artificial squids greeted him. Our enthusiasm was dampened, however, when John told us that he had been speaking with a Spanish skipper the day before. He said that the main shoals had not come any closer in than 80 miles.

That disappointment was tempered when he told us that two fish were hooked and lost 40 miles south of Union Hall two days previously by an angling boat. So, there was always a chance!

Basically, the method of fishing for albacore involves towing artificial squid teasers and large mackerel-type plugs behind a boat until a fish connects. At this stage the free baits are reeled in and the fish is played out.

The reason for this is that a double hook-up is not uncommon and these fish will sometimes cross lines at speed. The result is disastrous because, normally, both fish are lost. It pays to concentrate on an area where a tuna has been contacted because albacore tuna rarely travel alone.

We decided to head out 20 miles and then tow



A 12lb pollack on a shad for skipper John Angles.

Leslie Payne with his tremendous, 18lb specimen coalfish.



Many wrecks have resident seals that will strip you of good fish before their appetite is sated.

our lures at 10 knots in a southward direction, with the hope of meeting some of the stragglers from the main migratory shoals.

At the 30-mile mark we headed the boat in an easterly direction and, after three hours of trolling without any hits on the lures, the consensus was to head for the nearest wreck to try for its occupants. Then the day wouldn't be a complete blank.

By now, we could vaguely make out Mizen Head in the distance through the sea haze. If we headed for the nearest wreck we would get at least four hours of fishing on it before it would be time to pack up and go home. John picked the nearest good wreck that was on his books and he said it was a 40,000-ton cargo vessel nicknamed *Frankie* by local fishermen. She had been lying on the sea bed, protecting fish stocks since a German U-boat torpedoed her in 1917.

After 10 more minutes of steaming, John signalled that we were approaching the wreck. Not surprisingly, there was a big bull seal bobbing up and down on the surface above the structure.

It never ceases to amaze me how many wreck locations have resident seals. How they manage to find these fish havens in 350 feet of water, 20 miles offshore is unknown – though I do know that they will strip you of good fish before their appetite is sated!

Five anglers squeezed into the cabin, staring at the Simrad fishfinder as the wreck started to show. Slowly, shadows appeared above the image of the wreck. At first, the shadows were tight to it indicating pollack, but then mid-water shadows began to show too – just where you

Okay, we didn't find any tuna but, when you're catching fish like this, who cares?



would expect the coalies to be holding. Things were looking up and visions of huge, marauding ling lying in wait in the rusting metal hulk for some unsuspecting smaller fish to pass in front of them entered my mind. It wasn't the first time I had fished this wreck with John, and I knew the quality of fish to expect from it. Tactics for the rest of the day would be to, first, attack the pollack and coalfish shoals that lay above the wreck with artificial eels and shads of various sizes and colours. Then we would send down large, single mackerel baits for the big ling. Finally, if we had time, we'd try for a cod with a big jellyworm along the side of the wreck.

"Lines down," came the skipper's shout from the cabin, and three shads and two large Redgills headed for the sea bed. During that first drift, six pollack between 6lb and 10lb were landed. John also had a fabulous coalie of 15lb 9oz. What a beautiful fish it was – deep and solid, shaped like a torpedo and packing a tail built for speed.

Drift after successive drift kept producing quality fish, until Leslie Payne let out a groan indicating something big had taken his shad. Not only had it taken the shad, but it was also taking it back to the wreck and he wasn't able to stop it! Eventually, the fish slowed under the pressure of Leslie's clutch and he started to gain line, but only until it decided to head for the wreck again.



Patrick Buck's awesome, 37lb ling gave him a real tussle.



Mike's first-ever specimen pollack – a fish of 12lb 12oz.

Fifteen minutes later the tug-of-war was still going on, but Leslie was clearly winning and, after a few more minutes of pumping, a white shape began to show some 20 feet down. A final heave saw another beautiful, 18lb 8oz coalfish on the surface... beaten, broken, but magnificent!

Daniel was next to catch a specimen, a fine pollack of 12lb. I had persevered with a black Redgill, but even though I had plenty of pollack to about 11lb I just couldn't break that 12lb specimen weight. A change of tactics was called for, so I decided to switch to a 5in pink shad.

At the same time, Patrick and Leslie indicated they were going to try for a ling, so they each put up single-hook muppet rigs with a whole mackerel flapper as bait and sent them down on the next drift. This drift was to be mine; I broke my duck and landed a specimen pollack of 12lb 12oz.

As for the bait boys, Leslie had a small ling of around 15lb and Patrick was bitten through within minutes of hitting bottom. Not to be beaten, Patrick tied on a set of fatboy Hokkaiis, which he baited with mackerel strips. Looking at this scene, I had visions of two or even three ling attaching themselves to the baits and taking Patrick straight into the wreck! He was lucky this time as only one fish took the baits.

But what a fish it was! His rod bent double as the ling shook its head in the darkness 350 feet below. Patrick maintained the pressure, which was evident from the beads of sweat running down his face. Line was gained very slowly in what was to be an awesome battle between man and fish.

The tidal flow was at its strongest by now, which didn't help the situation. After what seemed an eternity a huge shape appeared 30 yards behind the boat. John was quick with the gaff and soon the ling was on the deck, all 35lb 12oz of it.

It was getting late, so John called for the last drift of the evening. As we all began to reel in, Leslie indicated something was showing an interest in his mackerel bait. It turned out to be another fine, 25lb ling.

What a day! Okay, we hadn't seen an albacore, but we had salvaged a great day with six specimens and five boxes of mixed fish. And there's always next year for the tuna!