

# Taking the



The bluefish's jagged and razor sharp teeth are made for shearing flesh and bone and make short work of most tackle.

PHOTOS BY JIM LEVISON

# Bite

out of

# Bluefish

*These basic rigging techniques will keep you playing the blues instead of singing them.*

*by Tom Keer*

**B**ack when I was a kid growing up in Connecticut, my father had a bass-fishing pal from Florida who occasionally fished the salt with us. On our first bluefish trip together—and despite repeated warnings from my father and me—the man decided to try his best bass-master lip grip on a bluedog. Our trip ended immediately, and only after driving to the emergency room at the speed of heat did the poor man find himself reattached to his thumbprint. ➤

Bluefish and stripers sometimes school together, in which case you'd better be prepared for the big choppers. See if you can spot the stripers gulping bait in this melee!

It was a harsh lesson in just how effective bluefish are at shredding flesh. They are ultra-aggressive, chop-and-spin predators that can sever anything in front of their nose, including leaders and flies. When they corral a school of baitfish, they will chop off the prey's tail, spin around, and then eat the head. Many times, pods of bluefish work themselves into such a bulimic frenzy that they eat until they vomit. And then they begin eating again, leaving behind nothing but a slick of fish parts and oil.

Fall-run bluefish are particularly savage, combining hard hits with occasional jumps and tail walks. They range in size from small, young-of-the-year "snappers" to adults in the double-digit range. Locals call the big autumn bluefish "choppers" or "gators." Whatever size bluefish you're catching, the fact is you will lose terminal tackle. And most of your flies, even wood poppers, will be destroyed. Some close attention to terminal rigging can help you minimize cut-offs and put more blues in the boat.

## Stopping the Chop

Flies can make a difference in bluefishing. Epoxy flies and balsa or hard-foam poppers are popular because you can catch a few fish on them before they disintegrate. Another technique is to combine a fly with a bite guard. Simply tie a streamer or bucktail pattern just above the bend of a long-shanked hook, tarpon-style. The striking bluefish typically gets the iron shank in its teeth, and the feathers and hook point are in its mouth.

These bite-guard-style patterns will also catch striped bass and can be used effectively when bluefish and stripers are schooling together. They also work well when the bluefish are selective and shy away from wire.

There are several ways to rig terminal tackle for bluefish. The most popular method employs a wire bite guard. Wire comes in three types: stranded, coated, and stainless. Stranded is the most popular because it is strong and flexible. The suppleness comes from wrapping several thin strands of wire around each other; so

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### **BITE-GUARD FLIES**

**Hook:** Eagle Claw 066SS or Mustad 34011, size 1/0 to 3/0.

**Thread:** Flat Waxed Nylon.

**Tail:** White saddle hackles.

**Underwing:** White bucktail.

**Overwing:** Chartreuse or brown bucktail.

**Back:** 8 to 10 peacock herl tips.

if a blue dog cuts one strand there are others to hold him. Coated wire is usually a soft-stranded wire that is covered with nylon for abrasion resistance and increased knotting capabilities. The old standby bite guards are made of stainless wire, sometimes referred to as hard wire. While these rigs are incredibly strong, they are also inflexible.

When bluefish are selective, a clear, heavy monofilament shock tippet works well. Most tropical anglers use shock tippets for tarpon or big backcountry redfish and snook, and the concept is similar. You can use prestraightened monofilament as well.


Regardless of your choice of material, you'll ultimately need to match your tippet to the bite guard or shock tippet. I typically use a three-times rule of thumb. For example, if I fish a 15-pound tippet, I'll use a 45-pound section of wire or shock. The length of the wire is personal preference, with four to eight inches common. Regionally, many anglers believe that the bigger the fish the longer the wire leader or the heavier the pound test.

## Connections

With today's highly flexible stranded wires, a three-turn surgeon's knot is all you need to connect the wire to the tippet. Attaching the fly is equally simple, and you have a choice of either a fixed or a loop knot. For a fixed knot, due to the bulk of the material, use a three-turn clinch knot. For a loop knot, try a double surgeon's loop. Make sure you tie a small loop so the bluefish don't lop it off. Hold the back part of the loop (the section closest to the fly) as you seat the knot; in doing so you can control the length of the loop and make it small enough so it's not in the fish's mouth and big enough so your fly will swim easily.

Wet each knot before you seat them. One benefit of stranded wire is that it cuts easily with scissors or with the cutters on saltwater pliers.

You'll need to rig differently for hard-wire bite guards. Straight stainless is quite strong. While it resists breakoffs, the stainless tends to kink and is sometimes difficult to use. To connect straight stainless wire to a leader, double back and bend the



If you are into bluefish that prove leader shy, or if there are stripers mixed in, use a monofilament leader and a simple streamer tied on an extra-long hook to serve as the bite guard.

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tag of the wire so that it is parallel to the standing wire. Attach your monofilament tippet with an Albright knot. To attach your fly, use a haywire twist. Some anglers like to use a snap between the twist and the fly to facilitate changing flies. Others feel the snap creates a weak link. To work with stainless you will need pliers and wire cutters.

The Orvis Company makes an easy-to-rig bite guard; there is a loop on one end and a pre-tied Haywire Twist in the other end. Tie an Improved Cinch knot in the loop end, unfurl the haywire twist, add your fly, and twist it back up. There is a plastic sleeve that drops over the end of the twist for security (see [www.saltwaterflyfishingmagazine.com](http://www.saltwaterflyfishingmagazine.com)).

Sometimes you may prefer to use a clear connection to your fly. Maybe you've got striped bass mixed in with the bluefish, or maybe the bluefish are just picky. Mono or fluorocarbon shock tippets work like a champ. Fluorocarbon offers additional toughness against the blue dog's snapping fangs. For blues under six pounds, use 30-pound test; 40-pound test for blues 6 to 10 pounds; and 50-pound test for blues in double digits.

Attach your tippet to the shock tippet with an Albright knot. The length of your shock will vary, but if the fish are selective then you can tie sections of four to six inches in length. If they're going

gangbusters, you can save rigging time by tying in 12 to 14 inches of shock tippet and simply attaching new flies as the old ones get chewed. A Homer Rhode loop knot is perfect to add your fly to the shock.

If you're fishing from a boat, a pre-rigged selection of attractor and imitator flies and some top-water poppers and subsurface streamers can be neatly stored in a tarpon stretcher box. If you're using a stretcher box, you may favor mono shock tippets as you can cover selective and unselective fish in one shot. An advantage is that you can store a dozen or more rigged flies, which makes for quick changes when the bite is on.

And all is not lost if you're a wade fisherman. Simply prerig your flies with flexible wire bite guards. Use a Homer Rhode

loop to your fly and tie a double surgeon's loop in the opposite end. Coil the wire and wrap the tag around the loop and store in a ziplock bag. When you come across a school of breaking bluefish, you can tie a double surgeon's loop in your tippet and connect your prerigged fly to your tippet with a loop-to-loop knot.

## Fishing Techniques

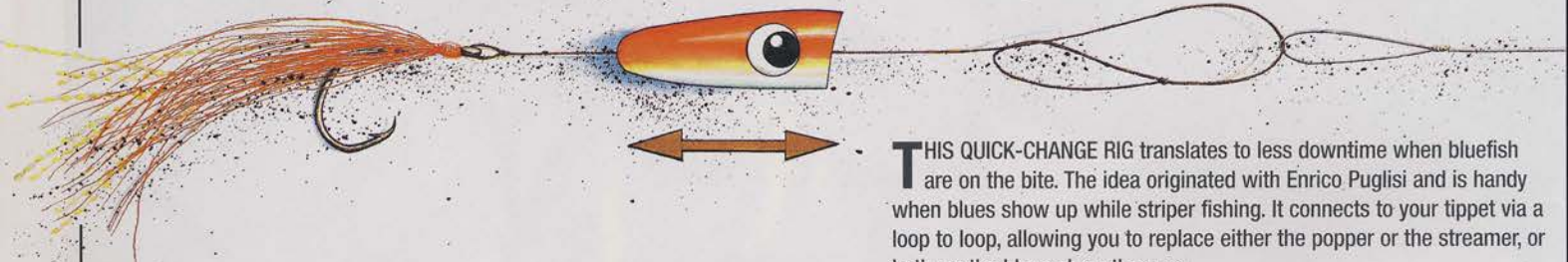
One of the most common mistakes when fighting bluefish is to treat them like other fish that you've been catching, such as



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In the fall, keep some poppers pre-rigged with soft braided wire, monofilament, or straight hard wire for the inevitable encounter with a school of slashing bluefish.

## The Popper & Dropper



A. J. WALKER

### TYING STEPS

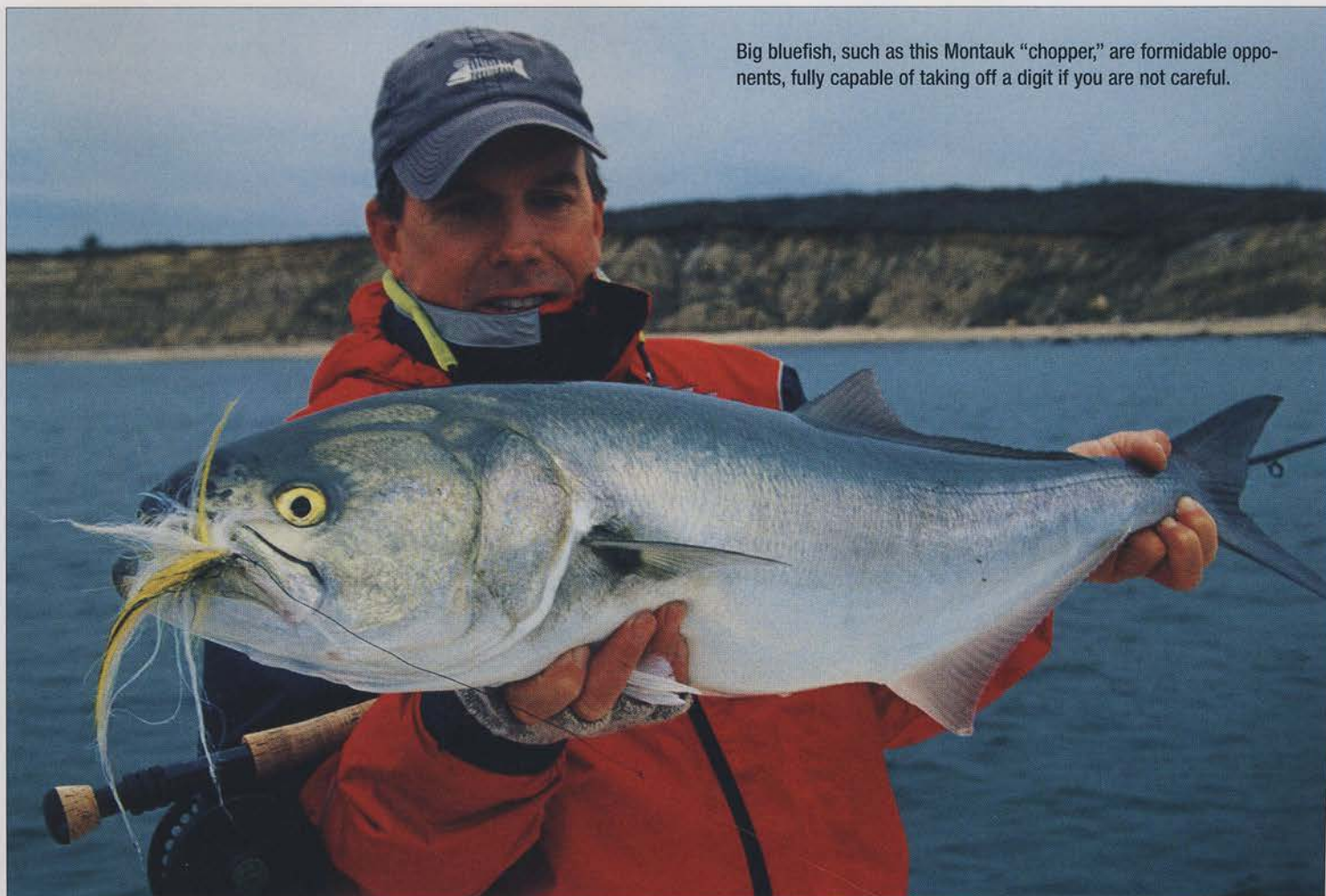
- 1 Tie orange, yellow, or chartreuse bucktail to the shank of a 1/0 to 2/0 J-type or circle hook. The latter often results in more hookups following typical bluefish crash-and-turn attacks, and it is easier to remove.
- 2 Tie a soft, braided-wire bite tippet to the dressed hook using a perfection loop or no-slip loop. Make a loop in the bigger end large enough for the popper to pass through. You want about six inches of wire between knots. I use Surfion Micro Supreme in 20- or 26-pound test.
- 3 Popper heads are one- to two-inch closed-cell foam—either preformed, tapered, and scoop-mouthed, or simple cylinders (as in Bob's Bangers). You'll need to drill holes lengthwise on preformed heads lacking a hole. Don't

**T**HIS QUICK-CHANGE RIG translates to less downtime when bluefish are on the bite. The idea originated with Enrico Puglisi and is handy when blues show up while striper fishing. It connects to your tippet via a loop to loop, allowing you to replace either the popper or the streamer, or both, as the blues chew them up.

use heads with hook slots cut along the bottom. Poppers can be as plain or fancy as you like, with or without eyes.

- 4 Thread the looped end of the bite tippet through the head. Dressed hooks can be fished free-swinging just behind the head or pushed into the rear end of the popper.
- 5 The rig connects to a minimum 20-pound-test tippet with a loop large enough to interlock with the wire loop. If bluefish are to be a side attraction, pre-looped sections of lighter mono tippet for stripers, or IGFA-legal setups, can be quickly looped to the main leader once the wire rig is removed.

—Jerry Gibbs



Big bluefish, such as this Montauk “chopper,” are formidable opponents, fully capable of taking off a digit if you are not careful.

JIM LEVISON

striped bass, bonito, or false albacore. Saltwater anglers commonly change the direction of their rod to control the fish's head. When you do that with a bluefish you frequently pull the leader across his mouth and give him an opportunity to bite your light tippet. When fighting a bluefish, keep your rod in one constant position, maintain pressure, and fight the fish from the butt of the rod instead of from the tip. Your fishing position should be slightly above or below the fish. You might need to walk around the boat or move up the beach, but keep the tension on the fly at all times.

Another common mistake is to allow the fish to stay in a school. Rival bluefish will converge on a fighting fish to investigate a possible free lunch. If you allow your hooked fish to stay in the middle of the school, odds are you'll get broken off by another competitive fish. Muscle him to the edge of the school by applying consistent pressure.

As with salmon or tarpon, bluefish jump to get the upper hand. Bluefish will jump in deep water, but they are particularly prone to acrobatics or surface thrashing when you hook them in shallow water. Don't exert too much pressure on a jumping bluefish, but don't bow too much, either. There is a middle ground, and if you totally bow to the jumping fish and allow too much slack in your leader, he'll get the mono in his teeth and cut you off.

It is best to land a bluefish with either a BogaGrip, a Lipper,

or a pair of pliers. But sometimes you're unprepared, and striper fishermen wading beaches don't want the weight of a BogaGrip in their kit. If you come up against a pack of bluefish barehanded, the first step is to tire him out. When your fish finally rolls, grab him on the dorsal side above the gill plate, right where the head and body meet. Once your quarry is subdued, a pair of forceps or pliers will enable you to remove the fly easily. Bend down your barbs for easy removal.

If you are wade fishing, beach the fish and use the same method. But if you plan to keep one for the table, make sure to bleed the fish immediately and get him on ice as quickly as possible. Bluefish get soft when they're out of the water, and since they are an oily fish they can taste very strong if left unbled in the sun for a long while.

These are just a few techniques to stop the chop on blues, and there are many regional variations, including the use of tube flies and various connection methods. But these basic rigging skills will keep you in the fight when the blitz is on. ■

*Tom Keer is a fisherman and freelance writer who lives in Massachusetts. He has some scars, but all fingers are intact.*

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