

CAUGHT OVGARD

Bluefin tuna fishing is staggering

(if you can get a line in the water)

By LUKE OVGARD
For the East Oregonian

VRSAR, Croatia — My reel screams as line peels off at 50 miles per hour. I arch my back, flex my arms, legs and chest as every muscle in my body make itself known.

Sweat beads on my forehead, and the surge of the boat sloshes salty water onto my face.

A fish 10 feet long and weighing half a ton — though capable of growing twice that size — thrums and battles at the end of my line as I jockey and strain to get the rod butt into my fighting belt.

Hands shaking, I lock in the rod and set my eyes on the finned torpedo some 200 yards distant now.

This fish is the culmination of my entire life's work. I steel myself for what will likely be an hour or more of intensity.

Then, as soon as it began, it is over. I awake, breathing hard.

A dream, but one that would soon become either a reality or a nightmare.

Booking

In the weeks leading up to my winter trip to Europe, the dream increases in frequency and intensity, affirming my decision to buy a boat with Marc Inoue of Ohana Fishing Charters and Lodge in Vrsar, Croatia.

For more money than I'd spent on any three charters combined before, I had the chance to see how that dream ended in the blue waters of the Adriatic Sea, between Croatia and Italy.

Numerous emails found me and my dad, the only member of my family willing to trade a day in beautiful Ljubljana, Slovenia, for a day on the water, driving down to the coast.

A snafu with a missing passport prevented us from crossing into Croatia and cost us a few hours, but we made it to our destination later that night after a lot of profanity I pray the border security couldn't understand.

With that much money and hope on the line, what followed was not my finest hour, and I feel awful for how I acted. Dad, I'm sorry.

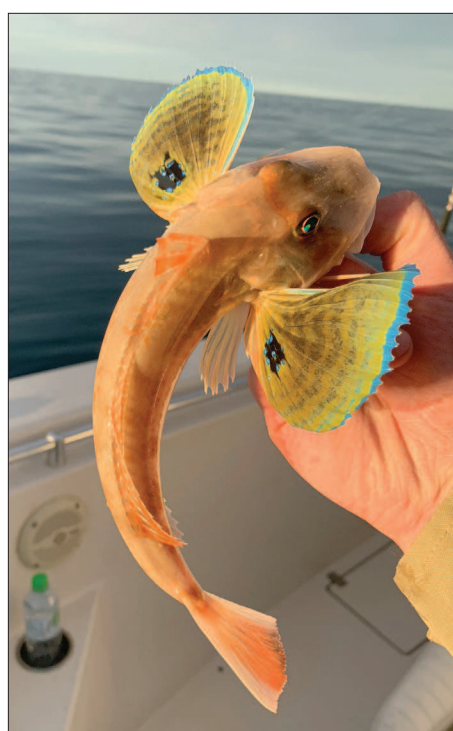
Though I'd had every intention of fishing the Vrsar Marina that night for all manner of smaller fish in my never ending #SpeciesQuest, it was much too late.

Pro tip: when traveling abroad, always make sure your passport is handy.

Embarking

We got up, ate breakfast and drank coffee with Marc and his wife and adorable newborn son before loading the boat.

We dinked around in the marina while

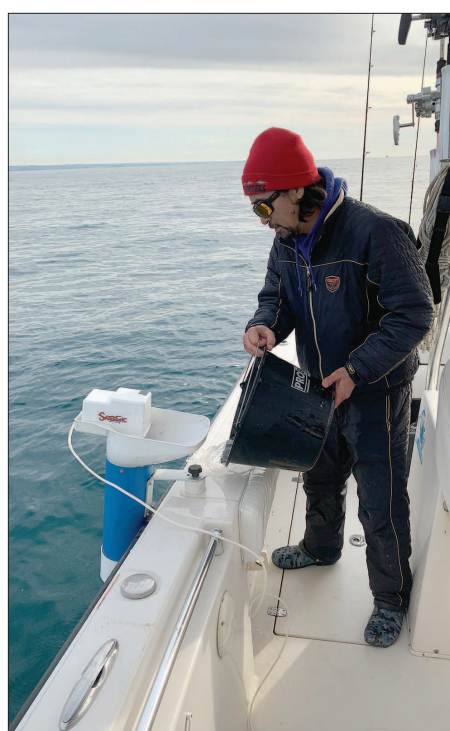


CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: The tub gurnard, a searobin, was one of the most beautiful fish I've ever caught. When the feeder stopped working, guide Marc Inoue had to spend some time fixing it. This was the beginning of the end for our tuna hopes. Dad wasn't feeling very well on this trip, and I acted like a petulant child when we hit every hardship on this trip, so that didn't help. Still, we had fun catching lots of small fish. The lesser smallspotted catshark was weirdly adorable. It covered its light-sensitive eyes with its tail.

Marc fueled the boat, and we landed several species of goby and some big-scale sand smelt, a new species for me but both a literal and figurative small fry in the face of bluefin tuna.

It took a few hours to locate the tuna, but when we did, they were even more impressive than I'd dreamed.

Imagine the same feeding frenzy you've seen with trout or salmon. Fish skimming under the surface, jumping, splashing and leaving a pool of blood in their wake. Except instead of fish the size of small dogs, the fish are the size of small cars and moving 50, 60 or even 70



Photos contributed by Luke Ovgard

miles per hour.

Suffice to say, it's absolutely staggering.

As we tried getting closer to the rampaging tuna, Marc began working the automatic bait feeder, a device that hooked to the gunwale and started a chumline.

Less than five minutes after we started, we heard a grunt, and the machine wound to a stop. The cord had proven to be a tripping hazard. Awesome.

I was in shock from the fish, but it was a good shock. The realization the fishing was killed flipped me to a bad sort

of shock.

A 500-pound class tuna breaking the surface 10 feet off the bow snapped me back to reality.

I asked for the topwater rod, and Marc reached for it, only to find it hadn't been set up.

Breaking

In a classic tough decision: fix the feeder or rig up a rod.

I would've happily done one of the two, but I had no idea how to fix the feeder nor where any of the topwater plugs were stored.

Marc opted to fix the feeder instead of showing me where the topwaters were. By the time the feeder was operating again, the school had moved.

We spent the better part of the day fishing live baits, but we never got close enough to try fishing topwaters the size of 20-ounce soda bottles again.

The trip was heartbreaking, frustrating and infuriating all at once.

Backup plan

Fortunately, Marc was sympathetic and helped us target all manner of other species once the tuna proved fruitless.

On lighter gear, we began targeting smaller fish on sabikis and bottom rigs. The bite was consistent, and we boated brown comber and greater weever (a highly venomous fish) left and right on squid and shrimp.

On another rod, I tied a bottom rig with a chunk of cutbait. I was pleasantly surprised when I pulled in a small shark. It's semi-opaque, solid color pupil-less eyes were hauntingly beautiful.

Since it was a deepwater, primarily nocturnal species, it used its tail to cover its eyes — a fascinating development.

I quickly photographed and released what I would later discover was a lesser smallspotted catshark.

To makeup for the tuna debacle, Marc stayed out much later than we'd planned, allowing us to target several species of seabream over thermal vents in the darkness. We got several, and it was a bit of a consolation for a trip I'd overhyped.

It could've been a nightmare, and it was far from that, but it certainly wasn't what I'd been dreaming of for so long.

Still, it won't stop me from dreaming big in the future. After all, as one television character put it: "Never stop dreaming because once you do, you're just sleeping."

Read more at caughtovgard.com; Follow on Instagram and Fishbrain @lukeovgard; Contact luke.ovgard@gmail.com.



Photo contributed by Bruce Barnes

Taxus brevifolia, Pacific Yew.

Pacific yew poisonous, but useful plant

By BRUCE BARNES
For the East Oregonian

Name: Pacific Yew
Scientific Name: *Taxus brevifolia*

OK, I know this plant doesn't bloom. It is selected for this column because it is a native plant that few people are familiar with, or they don't know it grows in the Blue Mountains. There aren't many still here. It is found from British Columbia to central California, and east to southern Alberta, northern Idaho, northwest Montana, and in northeast Oregon.

Taxus is the Latin name for the European yew tree, and *Taxos* is the Greek name for it. *Brevifolia* is Latin for short leaf.

The tree is a "conifer." But without a cone. It has what is called an aril, which looks like a small, reddish-orange, smooth berry with an open tip and a single seed inside. Imagine a small stuffed olive with the hole at the end, but with the pimento removed and the seed exposed down in the middle.

The needles on the branches look much like regular pine needles, but are shorter than those of other conifers in the Blues, and the branches are spreading or drooping. The bark has broad, flat, irregular, thin plates that shred and peel off with time. The older bark plates are grayish and the plates underneath are reddish or reddish-purple.

The Pacific Yew as well as the European Yew have been used in the past to make bows, and the Greek word taxon means bow. The hard and durable wood has probably had other uses over millennia. More recently the Pacific Yew was a source for the cancer drug Taxol, which is now made synthetically.

BEWARE: almost every part of the tree is deadly poisonous. Very small amounts of bark, needles, seeds, or even the sap are said to be enough to kill a person. It's probably best to wash your hands after handling it.

Where to find: There are a few examples of yew trees at the Umatilla Forks Campground.

BOOK REVIEW

Natural history book an ode to the geology of the Blue Mountains

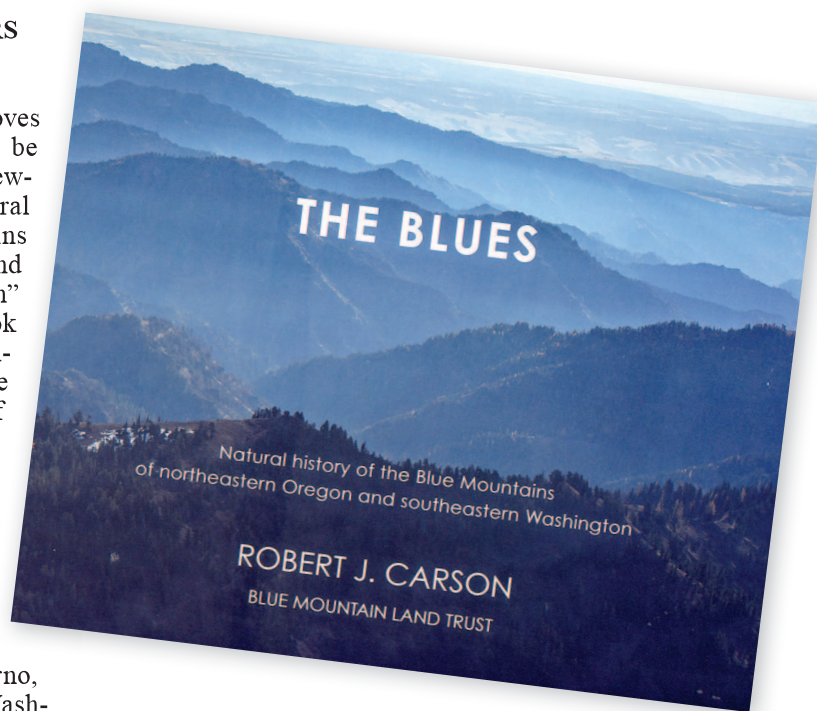
By RENEE STRUTHERS
East Oregonian

To say Robert J. Carson loves the Blue Mountains would be an understatement. His newest book "The Blues: Natural history of the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington" gives a comprehensive look at the geology of the mountain range that dominates the viewshed in our corner of the Northwest.

Carson, a geologist and Whitman College professor emeritus, takes readers through the history of our beloved Blues with a detailed discussion of how and when the Blue Mountains, stretching from Clarno, Oregon, to Clarkston, Washington, were formed and what makes them different from other mountain ranges.

In order to illustrate his scientific explanations of the structure of the mountains and how that influences everything from the soils to the watersheds to the animals and plants that live there, Carson invited more than a dozen photographers to provide stunning visuals. Poetry works and excerpts from other writings, including diaries and scholarly works, provide additional context.

Even lifelong residents of the range's vast sweep will discover plenty of reasons to venture into the Blues to discover new corners they didn't know existed in their own backyard. And adven-



Cover photo courtesy Keokee Books

A new book by Robert C. Carson tells the geological story of our own Blue Mountains.

To illustrate his scientific explanations, Carson invited more than a dozen photographers to provide stunning visuals.

Poetry works and excerpts from other writings, including diaries and scholarly works, provide additional context.

turesome visitors will have another reason to visit Eastern Oregon and southeast Washington state for ample hiking and outdoors opportunities.

And while "The Blues" is

chock full of hard science, it's also a beautiful coffee table book that will have readers opening it again and again.

"The Blues" is Carson's fourth book published in collaboration with Keokee Books. His other works include "Many Waters"; "Where the Great River Bends: A Natural and Human History of the Columbia at Wallula"; "East of Yellowstone: Geology of Clarks Fork Valley and the nearby Beartooth and Absaroka Mountains"; and "Hiking Guide to Washington Geology."