

Catch More in Rough Water: How the Pros Do It
Amberjacks, Tilefish and a Guide to Deep-Diving Plugs

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JUNE 2010
VOLUME 25 ISSUE 6

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Dig Deep for Big Tiles

*Stow the Electrics and Try Hands-On Cranking
for Some Down-and-Dirty Sport*

By Jim Mulvey

Imagine yourself on the observation deck of the Empire State Building overlooking New York City. On a clear day, you can see more than 80 miles, while the cars and taxis below appear no larger than small insects.

Now imagine yourself holding a rod and reel, dropping a rig into that traffic stream water-bugging its way across Manhattan. That's essentially what tilefish anglers do in the Hudson Canyon, southeast of New York City — almost within sight on a clear day. But out there, the “observation deck” floats as your rig drags along a soft clay bottom about a thousand feet below. Sound interesting? Just ask the handful of intrepid anglers who venture into the northern Atlantic to target tilefish in the depths.

Brilliantly colored golden tilefish thrive at dingy depths between 240 and more than 1,000 feet. Drop weighted rigs by hand for some serious fish-pulling exercise.



The Offshore Wrecking Ball

Hitting one of the many wrecks near the tilefish grounds can be highly productive and fun. Sea bass in the 6- to 8-pound class are common, while cod and pollock in the 35-pound range can be clammed or jigged. Mix in an occasional wreckfish or barrelfish, and the party's complete. Several worthy sites include:



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Finding the Tiles

Great northern tilefish (also known as golden tilefish) most commonly range from the Middle Atlantic Bight, which encompasses waters from Georges Bank to just south of the Hudson Canyon, as well as in parts of the Wilmington and Baltimore canyons. Farther south, anglers may also encounter them in addition to smaller blue-line and blackline tiles. Rolling plumes of warm water from the Gulf Stream maintain a consistent temperature for tilefish, and deep-dropping for them has bailed out many unsuccessful tuna and swordfish trips.

Tiles live mainly in burrows they construct in the silty clay surface of the continental slope. The pitch of the slope here is very gradual, rarely exceeding a 5-degree grade. In

Place	Latitude	Longitude	Depth
Bacardi	39°52'520"	72°38'700"	180'
Carolina	38°56'740"	73°05'420"	250'
Northern Pacific	38°38'344"	74°23'891"	145'
Texas Tower #4	39°47'809"	72°40'240"	185'

Tile What?

Biologists didn't even know that tilefish existed until 1879 when a cod boat pulled up a northern tile from 900 feet of water near the Nantucket Shoals Lightship off Massachusetts. A

two-year study by the United States Fish Commission following the capture determined that tilefish were abundant enough to support a new fishery.

Just as quickly, that northern tilefish population nearly disappeared

The Hot File on Cold Tiles

Great northern tilefish (*Lopholatilus chamaeleonticeps*), also called golden tilefish, live at depths from 240 to more than 1,000 feet on the continental shelf in the Atlantic Ocean off the East Coast.

Preferring areas with sandy or soft clay bottoms, the colorful fish range from Nova Scotia to Suriname in South America, except for most of the Caribbean Sea. The highest concentrations occur in Georges Bank off the New England coast and in the Hudson Canyon off New Jersey. They also range throughout parts of the Gulf of Mexico.

Great northern tilefish may live longer than 30 years and can reach weights of more than 60 pounds. They may exceed 40 inches long. The range of great northerns overlaps with smaller goldface tilefish (*Caulolatilus chrysops*) and blackline tilefish (*Caulolatilus cyanops*). In fact, these species may even share the same burrow network.

Spiny dogfish, conger eels and bigger tilefish typically prey upon juveniles. In turn, tilefish primarily eat small crustaceans, such as crabs and shrimp. They also eat mollusks, worms, sea urchins and small fish, often finding prey with their keen eyesight.

— John N. Felsher

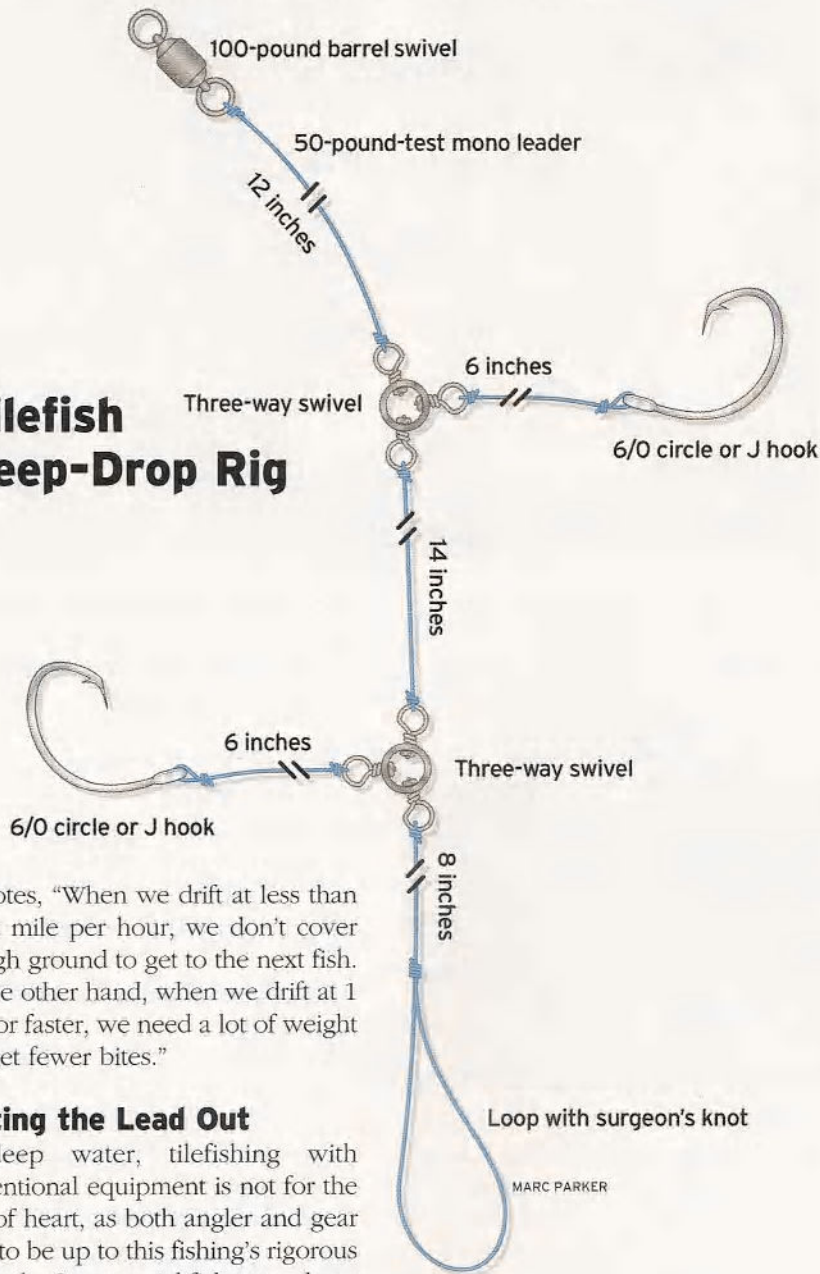


Golden tilefish

COURTESY KING SAILFISH MOUNTS

Tilefish Deep-Drop Rig

Tilefish Deep-Drop Rig



He notes, "When we drift at less than half a mile per hour, we don't cover enough ground to get to the next fish. On the other hand, when we drift at 1 mph or faster, we need a lot of weight and get fewer bites."

Getting the Lead Out

In deep water, tilefishing with conventional equipment is not for the faint of heart, as both angler and gear need to be up to this fishing's rigorous demands. Commercial fishermen have reported catching tiles in the 80-pound class, but tilefish generally run about 5 to 25 pounds. (Dennis Muhlenforth of Hockessin, Delaware, caught a 63-pound, 8-ounce behemoth golden tile on conventional rod and reel last August, posting the new IGFA all-tackle world record.)

Just reeling up your rig for a bait check or to position for a new drift can get the heart pumping, let alone hooking into a huge fish, so it's

Above: Anything more than a two-hook system creates tangles. Right: Tape extra weights together for a compact package.

SF TIP

Tape the Lead
Tilefishing may demand the use of several pounds of weight to hold bottom. We use multiple bank

sinkers and tape them together with duct or electrical tape to minimize spinning during long passes through the water column.



these areas, tilefish make networks of burrows and generally stay close to or within these "pueblo" complexes. Many people believe that tilefish colonies sculpted the hummocky ridges along the sides of the Hudson Canyon over many generations.

Tilefish differ from other structure-seeking fish such as blackfish in that they enter their narrow burrows head-first and are only able to exit tail first. Since tilefish can't feed from cover and do forage for food outside their burrows, you don't need to anchor.

On some fish finders, a clay bottom shows up as a different color at certain settings. At the very least, look for lumps and irregularities along the continental slope. A quality fish finder in super-zoom mode would work great for pinpointing these indigenous tilefish areas, but working the bathymetric bands right above the edge even without sophisticated sonar can be very productive as well. Stay in 400 to 600 feet of water as a good starting point. When the sinker finally hits soft bottom, you're in tilefish country! Fish on days with minimal wind and current, and avoid new- or full-moon phases.

Capt. Jeff Gutman runs his 85-foot Gulf Craft *Voyager* out of Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey, and consistently puts his clients into big tiles. He considers drift speed the most important element in this fishery, postponing his trips when the forecast calls for winds exceeding 20 knots.

"Drift speed is important for two reasons," Gutman says. "First of all, you want to be drifting at a speed that allows the fish to catch up to the bait as opposed to having your bait fly past them before they can home in on it. Secondly, drifting too fast requires a lot of lead to stay on the bottom, as well as a great deal of scope in the line. Both of these factors make feeling the bites more difficult, and if nothing else, make fishing less enjoyable."

When Gutman is in an area with tight concentrations of tiles, he likes a drift speed of half a mile per hour or less. When fishing an area where tiles seem to be more scattered, the captain prefers to drift slightly faster.



Once you've caught a few tiles, like the hefty golden on the left, hit some wrecks on the way back to shore for grouper and wreckfish.

for tiles is essential. Even in depths of more than 1,000 feet, braided line has the sensitivity to detect bites.

Of equal importance is the narrow diameter of braided line. The wider monofilament line offers more surface area to the current. The deeper you drop, the more the currents affect the line, creating more slack and reducing your ability to feel a fish. Ultimately, with mono you need more weight to hold bottom and more line to get it there. Braided line keeps line scope to a minimum and allows you to fish with less weight — both virtues when it comes to tilefishing.

As for rod choice, a typical cod stick with a lot of backbone does the trick. You want a 6- to 7½-foot rod rated for 50-pound-test. Most importantly, your equipment should be comfortable: You might have six to 10 hookups over the course of the day. That

means you'd be pulling on fish for more than a mile. The handgrips both above and below your reel should be to your liking, and if you use a gimbal belt, fish with a rod made for that.

It is worth noting that responsible anglers keep conservation in mind while tilefishing. Presently, mid-Atlantic anglers may keep eight tilefish per person per day. In the Southeast — from North Carolina through eastern Florida — anglers may take only one golden tile per day, three tilefish total within the grouper aggregate bag limit. (Fishing for blueline and golden tiles is prohibited within eight deepwater marine-protected areas along the Southeast coast.) Fisheries managers haven't set a minimum size; such a limit would be folly since tiles can't survive a return to their deep haunts once they've been reeled to the surface.

Let common sense prevail. If you get into a mad-dog bite, don't catch every tile in the area. Catch a few, and then switch to hunting other species. Some offshore options in tile country include targeting the tuna migration, if you time it right, or hitting one of the countless wrecks that hold jumbo sea bass, cod, pollock and wreckfish.

Rigonometry

The rigging options are countless, but the process is a simple one. As with other types of bottomfishing, you can run the gamut as to how much



KEN NEILL (2)

Blueline tilefish don't grow as big as goldens nor do they become as colorful. But they still make great table fare.

important to have proper equipment. Use a reel with a high retrieve ratio, a large spool or both to gain more line with each crank. Shimano Torsa and Tiagra reels do an excellent job of this. For the angler on a budget, the Newell S454-5, Okuma Titus T-20 and Penn 320 GTi are all very capable reels when spooled with preferred line — braid in the 65-pound-test range. To optimize performance, spool up slightly beyond normal capacity. A reel filled to the max will retrieve the most line per turn.

Many line choices work well for tilefishing — as long as they're braid! While the debate over monofilament and braided line will continue for many other fishing applications, braid

SF INSIGHT

Environmental Key

The tilefish is considered a "keystone" species because it creates habitat for other marine life that wouldn't otherwise be present. By

building a network of burrows, tilefish give crustaceans, mollusks, worms, sea urchins and small fish a place to live. In turn, tilefish feed on the very creatures their burrows house.

you want to accessorize your rigs. A high-low type of rig gives you peace of mind in knowing that a second bait waits for a bite if you miss the first one. Anything more than a two-hook system is likely to court disaster because your rig can become entangled either with itself or someone else's during its long passes through the water column.

Capt. Fred Gamboa runs his *Andreas' Toy*, a 31-foot Contender, out of Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey, to the edge for jumbo tilefish whenever weather permits. He likes to keep his rigs fairly simple. "I tie double-hook rigs with 5/0 circle hooks topped with B-2 squid glow bodies. And I always use three-way swivels over dropper loops because you greatly reduce the chance of getting spun into a mess," he says. "We've been working several areas that hold huge tilefish, and you can't use anything more than a two-hook rig if you want [a trophy catch] to be considered for an IGFA record."

A crimper comes in handy when making your own rigs because you want to use at least 50-pound mono. Since you won't be releasing fish, you can use either circle or J hooks, ranging in size from 4/0 to 10/0. Add beads, spinners or teasers to your liking, although the naked rig seems to produce well on its own. Whole squid sets the standard for bait. For extra enticement, tip the hook with strips of tuna belly, bluefish or mackerel.

The best-case scenario for weight is when 20 ounces will hold bottom, but be prepared to drop as much as 80 if conditions dictate. Homemade sinkers are a common sight on tile trips, along with window-sash weights, downrigger balls and multiple bank sinkers.

Tile Tactics

If you want to cook, you've got to be in the kitchen! Simply put, you have to make sure that your rig stays on the bottom if you want to catch tilefish. The gradual depth changes along the continental slope, plus the possibility of large networks of tilefish burrows, constantly affect bottom contours in good fishing waters. Keep in touch with the ocean floor by bouncing your weight along the bottom, and make adjustments

SF INSIGHT

Temperature Dependent

Tilefish prefer water temperatures between 47 and 53 degrees Fahrenheit, so they range within a fairly narrow band of water created by the Gulf Stream along the outer edge of the continental shelf. That band

may be less than 10 miles wide during winter, but it's significantly wider in the summer. Tilefish move between burrow complexes to follow the water temperatures. Some theorize that tilefish slow to a state of near hibernation during winter months.

to the amount of line you're paying out. Gamboa notes, "In the depths that tilefish are found, they rely more on motion than sight when feeding. Bouncing your sinker around their burrows creates vibrations that make them investigate what's going on."

Tilefish attack a bait like many other bottomfish in that they may hit it a few times before grabbing in earnest. Once you feel a couple of raps, point your rod down while keeping the slack out of your line. Then lift your rod tip up to set the hook. If you miss the initial hit, don't worry. Gutman advises, "Tilefish will come back after they miss a bait. Don't reel up 10 or 20 feet to make sure that the fish is not on; just let it back a few feet, and as long as you still have bait, you'll probably get another bite."

There is nothing subtle about a tilefish once you hook into one. They thrash around, and larger fish can take line after your hook-set in an effort to

retreat back into their burrows, which is something you definitely want to prevent. For this reason, set the drag tight so that you can horse them out of reach from their digs. The ensuing fight can range from feeling like dead-weight retrieval to tug of war with a Rottweiler. Either way, you're going to have your work cut out for you — it's just a matter of how ragged you'll be at the end of the battle.

Deep Thoughts

When you finally get your tile near the surface, your struggle is almost over. Since tilefish habitat is one of extreme pressure — a staggering 460 pounds per square inch at 1,000 feet — these fish are ill equipped for less depth. The great pressure change they experience on their way up causes gases in their swim bladder to expand. Often, they're upside down when you first spot them.

And what a sight it is when you see a tilefish for the first time! It's hard to envision such a brilliantly colored fish existing in a near-lightless environment. Their ivory-white undersides give way to the luminescent blues, greens and yellows that flank their sides. Tilefish taste great; their white fillets cook in thick flakes and taste mildly sweet, not unlike lobster meat — a great reward after a long trip offshore.

Since so few boats target tilefish, those that do venture into the Atlantic should find excellent action. If you make the commitment to go get them, you should also make the commitment not to overfish them. Tilefish are yet to be a heavily regulated species in the mid-Atlantic, so the onus falls on fishermen to show due diligence.

That's not to say that you won't encounter a big fish. Forty- to 50-pound tiles are not uncommon. So get out there on your observation deck, high above the ocean floor, and see if you can tempt King Kong of the deep up and over the rails. 🐟

***About the Author:** Jim Mulvey lives in Gillette, New Jersey, and has written for a number of fishing and outdoor magazines. He can usually be found driving around in the world's largest tackle box or somewhere east of the Atlantic shoreline.*

Tilefish Charters

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Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey
732-672-1561
www.andreastoycharters.com

Capt. Jeff Gutman

Voyager Sport Fishing
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Viking Fleet

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