

I Dream Of Tuna

EXCLUSIVE Story!

Charter skipper and mad keen angler, Declan Kilgannon, explains in his own words how he realized a childhood dream by boating not one, but two giant bluefin tuna off the Northwest coast of Ireland recently!

This all started for me many years ago with the gift of a small spinning rod and a few bits of tackle. I vividly remember the early mornings out in the fields searching for cowpats, looking for worms that would serve as bait!

This was at my grandparents house in Co. Donegal. I was only in single figure years, but even then the hunt was on for the big one and I was fascinated by stories from my uncle of the huge salmon that lived in the river Finn.

Growing up by the ocean I spent many a long day jigging for mackerel off various cliffs and piers, but my interest in all things fishy really went 'Boom' when at around the age of 20 I discovered scuba diving.

This was the beginning of making a living from the love of the oceans for me, and scuba diving and sea angling became something that others call 'Work'.

My first angling boat was a Mitchell 31, and we plied our trade and had great success with shark fishing in Donegal Bay, the talk then was always of big tuna, but we were not equipped to target them.

New Boat, New Prospects

'Kiwi Girl', arrived into Mullaghmore in 2004. Liam Carey originally had her purpose built to target tuna, and now my dreams were becoming a reality. Liam and I spent days, weeks, months and years shoulder to shoulder on the fly bridge, looking out for any sign of our dream coming true.

The agony and torture of wondering if it was something we were doing wrong was unexplainable. Were we not using the right equipment, or were we just not in the right place?

When Liam decided to get out of sea angling my hopes began to fade. We had missed the good years around 2000, 2001, 2002 and now 'Kiwi Girl' was going to be sold there were no signs of tuna for me. Then Liam dropped a bombshell... "Out of anyone in the world, I want you to have the boat," he said. So we conjured up ways that I could operate and run her.

Now I was on my own, and the dream continued but bad weather, no money and no signs of tuna made it very difficult to keep it going.

Every year with whatever money I had I bought a drop of diesel and serviced up the gear and off I went exploring.

Most people thought I was mad! Like many other small businesses the recession hit us very hard, and having hit the wall the sale of all the tuna gear was on the cards. With the encouragement of my other half to try and find another way, we struggled through and held on to the gear. Over the last few years I advertised 'experimental' bluefin tuna fishing to try and find likeminded anglers to share the costs of being out there.

'Mad' was again the word used most frequent! I started pushing out the shark trips on to the tuna grounds, hoping for signs of life, which never appeared... until this year!



The official weight, and a childhood dream realized.



Declan and his boy (left) with Michal Czubala and their 628lb bluefin.



A quick snap and tag and this one went back.



The guys measure their prize.

“Sometime around 3pm lightning struck again. A reel started to scream and it was FISH ON! As line disappeared from the spool we gave chase. Running out of line seemed possible, but I was not about to let it happen”

Just Amazing

Throughout the month there was baitfish everywhere, as far as the eye could see. And, the 3 was absolutely perfect.

The good weather brought anglers out of hibernation and things began to turn a corner. Shark fishing started off with a bang and we had some brilliant days, our best shark this year getting up towards the 170lb mark. I tag and release all the big fish that come aboard 'Kiwi Girl' and encourage my guests to only take for the table.

In September the rumours started. Albacore fishermen reported a lot of Bluefin, and there was the odd 'splash' sighted off our coast.

The phone call came in off a reliable sighting on the evening of Tuesday 24th and soon after that I was on the boat setting new line on the outriggers!

Ready For Action

At 5am the following morning, Wednesday 25th, after spending hours convincing Michal Czubala (who runs the diving side of our business) that this was a 'Great' idea, we set sail from Mullaghmore. At dawn I started to pick up activity on the sounder. We began getting the gear ready and we were soon fishing. We had a number of tuna sightings within just a couple of hours, and we trolled in pursuit.

By noon we were in among the fish and that familiar feeling came back "What am I doing wrong?" I began to try everything. I changed rigs, trolling speed and arrangements. Then, at 2pm, my heart stopped as one of the reels started screaming!

It was only now that I finally had a formula and confirmation that what I was doing all these years worked. That fish took a lot of line but busted us in the first few minutes.

Michal was of course disappointed, but I didn't care. This was a new achievement for me, and the closest I'd come to catching the fish of my dreams. One by one we checked all the lures and satisfied ourselves all was good.

Second Chance!

Sometime around 3pm lightning struck again. A reel started to scream and it was FISH ON! As line disappeared from the spool we gave chase. Running out of line seemed possible, but I was not about to let it happen. Taking turns grinding the reel and steering the boat the hours passed like minutes. We made mistakes and lost line but two hours in we began to have confidence in ourselves and started winning the fight.

It took us three hours to tame the giant, and when she broke the surface for the first time I cannot begin to describe the feeling - 'this fish was huge!'

It was a dream come true alright, and all of a sudden the years of hard work and money spent on chasing my dream finally arrived at the back door of the Kiwi Girl.

We got the fish on board and after making sure this fish was not going

to be wasted I made the decision to bring it home. It wasn't an easy decision for me to make, but it was my first one and I was now confident that bluefin tuna fishing was now not a dream but a reality.

It was the first one to be caught in years and it was a giant! The calls were made and a massive crowd was on the pier to welcome us home. Even my young son was taken out of his bed to see 'Daddy's big fish'.

The huge tuna was dealt with by professionals and a certified weight was all I wanted from them, with any money raised from the sale going into research and tagging of these beautiful fish.

Thursday was a bit of a blur after celebrations, but between phonecalls and interviews we got the boat ready and at 6am Friday we were off again.

Can You Believe It!

Being offshore I had very little idea of the storm ragging ashore - what was legal and what was not.

We hooked our second bluefin tuna around 4pm! Bluefin tuna fishing off the northwest coast of Ireland had just had its best week ever.

This fish was well into the 400lb mark, and still full of beans when she came to the back door of Kiwi Girl. This time there was only one decision to make, and that was how to best care for this animal. Carefully landed and unhooked we got water running through her gills and got her tagged (tag 40825), then took plenty of photos before letting her slip back into the water. It took a second, but a bob of the head and a flick of the tail she was gone - 'JOB DONE'.

After feeling for years that I was too late to the party, I was rewarded with my first one and so far the biggest at 628lb.

You will only ever catch a fish with a hook in the water and you will only catch a big fish if you keep trying, or be around people with the passion and determination to achieve what they set out to do.

I must thank local skippers Brian McGilloway and Michael Callaghan for all their help and advice, which in turn has helped me to realise a childhood dream. 🐟



The 'Kiwi Girl' - now a legendary boat!