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Capt. Ryan Van Fleet of Tavernier brings aboard another yellowtail, produced by serious chumming techniques for tough conditions.

Yellowtail Down and Dirty

By David Conway, Managing Editor

**Tactics to turn
on the bite day
and night.**

You won't come home clean, but you'll come home with fish.

It's yellowtail season in South Florida and the Keys, and we all love those days with perfect conditions, when the wind and current line up and your baits zip back to hungry fish in the chum line—but we don't always get them. Capt. Ryan Van Fleet, of Good Karma Charters in Tavernier in the Keys, employs some down and dirty tactics for yellowtail for those days. These tactics can be used elsewhere in Florida of course, as yellowtail are widespread around the southern end of the state. They can also be used anywhere and anytime current runs a bit strong near reefs as they produce mutton snapper, mangrove snapper, grouper and other reef species. But wear your old clothes.

It's only five miles to Capt. Ryan's reef locations from his dock at Tavernier Creek Marina. The Gulf Stream swings close to the reef there, which can be great for access to pelagics fish like wahoo and dolphin, but can foul up reef fishing with its powerful current and clear water—making it hard to get a chum slick going and fool the sharp-eyed yellowtail. So Capt. Ryan learned to play dirty.

“April through June, into July, are best to catch the big yellowtails. I like cloudy days, or low light conditions, like late in the day. If I'm offshore and having a slow day, I'll

wait until it's late to go in and yellowtail, 'cause you know it's going to be good. For visitors to the Keys, if it's bright and sunny and you don't have a lot of chum, I'd go out and catch dolphin first and wait until late to go for yellowtail for a couple hours.”

I made the 3 ½ hour drive down to fish with Capt. Ryan on a spring morning. After lunch at Habanos at Tavernier Creek Marina, by 3 o'clock we were fishing at spots where, he said (and showed me the pics) he was catching 4- and 5-pound flag yellowtail the night before. I was a bit surprised—such nice yellowtail so close to the mainland?

“I can get 4- and 5-pound yellowtails right here in Tavernier, and from what I've seen, it's like that up and down the Keys. You just have to know where the congregations of those bigger fish live, and you have to stay in touch with it, because they do move.”

Of course, for us, winds were up, pushed by the late season front we watched roll down on us from the north, and the current pushed right up onto the reef, against that wind.

PUT YOUR CHIPS DOWN

Bring one hundred pounds of chum in 25 pound blocks. “I like the Killer Bait brand.” He uses old cat litter bins to hold the frozen blocks. Start with 50 pounds in the water in two big, open-mouthed chum nets. Wait a bit before fishing, maybe 30 minutes, 45 minutes to get

Yellowtail



Bury that bait in some loose chum. Mold it into a chum ball, below, and let it fall. Right, cover the line with some loose chum as you drop the bait.



them biting. Later, once that 50 pounds is gone, drop down to 25, maybe to 10.

"You don't want to overfeed them. I like to get the fish up and get them eating so it's easy. I commit to a spot and give it time, typically an hour or even more. The bigger fish tend to come later in the chum phase. You'll also see that the grouper and the muttoms will also sneak in after a while, and I'll wait at least an hour to bottom fish for them."

We were in 75 feet of water just off the reef. "There's a reason why fish are here, and they'll be nearby too if the reef is healthy, with good rocky bottom and lots of bait," he says. "I don't fish any spot over and over. I'll move another hundred yards or two hundred or even a mile and fish there, so that I'm creating another productive plot. So if you go to one spot,

"You'll also see that the grouper and the muttoms will also sneak in after a while."

and someone's there, you'll have another nearby spot you can go to."

Even if people are only in the Keys for a week, he tells them to do some research with the depth finder and try a few different areas.

With the wind picking up the line and the current running strong under the boat, it was tough to feel the bait sinking into the current and the line pulling off. So Ryan put the rod in the holder and fingered out the line. This takes some skill, because you have to feel the exact instant the fish takes the bait, then pick up the rod, close the bail and catch the fish. But fingering the line out gives you a better connection to feel the drift of the bait in the current.

"Your pull needs to match the pull of the current," he says. "I'm not fighting the wind with the rod. The 30-pound braid cuts

through the wind to let the bait drop, but I still might need to put the bait in a chum ball to get it down faster where the current will take it."

Ryan uses that 30-pound braided main-line and tries to get fish on his outfit with a 30-pound fluorocarbon leader of about six feet. If they're line shy, he'll switch down to the outfit with 15-pound leader. But he likes 30-pound because with it he can haul in the bigger fish fast and keep them from any sharks or 'cudas. He likes 3/0 Gamakatsu livebait hooks because they're strong; they don't bend and cost you fish. "The little yellowtail jigs, those hooks will bend."

We started to get the yellowtail, one at a time. For bait, he'll use slivers of bonito, fresh dead goggle eye if he has them or slivers of speedo he'll catch in the chum line with the ice-fishing rod he brings along. "That ice-fishing rig is perfect size for picking up bait by the boat." Live pilchards are a great bait, if you can get them.

The recycling bin on his deck is full of his

Yellowtail



Capt. Ryan holds a fine mutton snapper caught while yellow-tailing—a common occurrence when fishing near the reef in the Keys.

When conditions are tough, a lot of folks won't even bother yellowtailing.

loose chum. There's no sand in it. It's only scratch grains mixed with water. The product he uses is called Home Grown Layer Crumble. It's yes—chicken feed. "I mix it with water until I get it the consistency of a dough ball. It binds up well, but it takes some mashing up. It holds together well in the saltwater.

"If I get in a pinch and cannot get block chum, this stuff gets them to the boat without the use of raw chum," he laughs. "It costs \$30 for a 50-pound bag. I just added some fish oils and menhaden milk to the mix and put it in the chum bag. Just shake it and you're set. Also works great for patch reef fishing."

Did I mention Capt. Ryan calls his spots the Fish Farm?

For the chum ball, you bind up your hooked bait in the loose chum the size of the baseball. You drop the chum ball, let it sink down into the current, let it ride into the strike zone, then give the line a tug to pull it apart and attract the fish. Alternately, without a chum ball, cast out your bait, give

it a head-start in the current, then throw out a handful of loose chum to cover your line. But the chum ball will help the bait sink faster in hard current.

"Some guys will dilute their chum ball mixture into a slop," he tells me, "and they'll throw it out into the water to cloud it up and throw their line and get the fish feeding at the same time. That works really well on the bright days with really clear water."

We had a decent box of fish after two hours, including a nice mutton snapper, when the front came down and we had to duck back into the marina for safety. We waited it out, and headed back out for sunset. "This is my favorite time to yellowtail of all," Capt. Ryan said. "And the mangroves come out at night, too."

His clothes were absolutely splattered with chum. His boat was a mess. On the way out, he said, "There is another little trick to the menhaden chum. In the winter

time, the fish get lethargic. They'll eat the chum, but they won't take the bait. Even on light leaders. Those winter days, I won't even take out bait, just a lot of menhaden green chum (TournamentMaster green chum). For that trick—you get really dirty doing it, but when all else fails—there's something in the menhaden green chum. It's like little gizzards of fish, and you pick them out, looking through the thawed chum, and put 'em on your hook and you'll get bites. Everybody thinks I'm crazy, but I learned that trick from an old-timer, an old yellowtail fisherman, and those guys know how to fish."

HUMAN COMPETITION

Let's face it. In the Keys, barracuda and sharks aren't your only competition. Get out there first, with a lot of chum.

"If you're coming in at 11 o'clock when everybody's chum slick has been going," Capt. Ryan says, "you're probably going to get your butt kicked and waste some money. They have the fish in their

chum, and you're not likely going to take them away. Remember, if the current is ripping, you'll have to watch to see that your chumline isn't blowing away to nothing and just staying on the surface. You can try the chum balls then."

As for proximity, you don't want to be fishing in another guy's chum slick. His general rule is, if he can hear their conversations, he's way too close. "There's yellowtail up and down those reefs. So find an area where nobody's fishing and try it," he advises.

On the other hand, when conditions are tough, as we had it, a lot of folks won't even bother yellowtailing. That's better for you.

The next morning, we pretty much had the reef to ourselves for the first few hours and we were putting 'tails in the boat. Capt. Ryan takes his time between fish, gives them a few minutes to get closer to the boat again where he wants them. One at a time, but in they came.

After about 2½ hours the speedos and the ballyhoo moved in, the yellowtail got bigger, and Capt. Ryan put down a speedo head in a chum ball that produced a black grouper on spinning gear.

The down and dirty tactics take some time and patience, but they paid off with another productive session fishing—our third session in less than 24 hours. **FS**