

# Mahi-Mahi Magic on the Island of Kauai

By

David and Mary Gayle Sartwell



A school of yellowfin tuna

A rainbow showed bright against the green, vegetation-lined cliffs of the southern end of the island of Kauai. It was a beautiful, land-to-water arc that was incredibly vibrant, displaying all of its colors with a dazzling intensity. I saw it so clearly because my senses were on overdrive as a 20-lb. mahi-mahi was stripping the backing line off my fly reel at a knob-blurring rate that would have him in Japan shortly if I couldn't turn him.

Reaching down to the right side of the Delta reel, I tightened the drag a bit with a clockwise turn. I knew this would put more pressure on the leader, but I was confident the 100-lb. fluorocarbon could take it. This was my first strike of the day and I didn't want to blow it.

Sure enough, the fish slowed down as the increased load started to take

its toll. I was smart enough not to bend the 12-wt. Predator rod in the initial burst of speed, but the minute I felt the fish start to tire, I raised the slender wand and put an arc in it to provide shock resistance.

Up he came, his blue-green back shimmering in the sunlight, his bright golden sides illustrating why the Spanish named this fish Dorado. He whipped his big bull head back and forth, trying to shake the hook from his jaw. He crashed back to the surface and made a hole in the ocean.

The gigantic swells we were wallowing through made standing on the stern deck a balancing act. The thigh-high rails allowed me to lean into the fish while at the same time keeping me aboard.

The fish decided to move. Turning 180 degrees, he launched into a high-speed run, just under the surface, back toward the

harbor of Lihue. Now I started to let the rod do its work. I raised the tip and let it bounce a bit giving the mahi-mahi not only the line drag but the resistance of the rod itself. He soon stopped as if trying to figure out his next course of action. He didn't know what the problem was, but he knew he didn't like it.

As my guide, Lance Keener, backed the boat toward the waiting fish, I began to get line back on the reel. Even though I had my fingers on the knob, I kept them there in such a way as to be ready to let go if he made a sudden bolt and whipped the reel into action. Slowly he came toward us, as if to find out what was giving him such a problem. There were still little bursts of energy and short workouts, but he kept steadily coming toward us. But what would he do when he saw the boat?

Keener continued backing the boat



Setting the trolling rods



The pink duster works on this smaller tuna.

toward the fish while I reeled as fast as I could, keeping tension on the line so he wouldn't throw the hook. With a flick of his tail the mahi-mahi signaled, "Fooled ya!" He started the reel sounding off again with a high-pitch squeal. I raised the rod a bit and let him go.

The word mahi-mahi is Hawaiian for strong and this one certainly was. He flew away from us with a powerful resolve, but I could tell the first run had taken a lot from him. The weight of the line and the drag of the reel eventually were too much. This time when he paused I was able to reel him back to where he rolled next to the boat. With a single practiced swipe with the gaff, Mate Howard Singer bent his knees and pulled the big fish aboard. My first mahi-mahi on a fly rod!

Back in January I'd contacted Keener of Ohana Fishing Charters in Lahue and told him I wanted to come to Kauai to fly fish for big pelagics, fish that live near the surface or in the watercolumn. His reaction was somewhat quizzical.

"You want to fly fish?" he asked. "Nobody fly fishes here. There are only about a dozen charter captains on the whole island and nobody goes out of the harbor to fly fish."

"I know, I heard," I said. "What I need is a captain that is willing to try something different. And I heard you were the best at finding fish." (I thought a little blatant flattery couldn't hurt.)

"Well, I'll give it a go, but I'm bringing along our regular trolling gear in case your fly rods blow up," he replied.

We arrived on a Wednesday afternoon, Mary Gayle and I, and met our guide at his boat, *Hoomaikai*, early Thursday morning. The sun was just climbing up out of the ocean as we headed out of the Lihue harbor. While we bumbled on out of the harbor, I rigged the fly rods.

I brought along a 12-weight, four-piece Predator rod with a Redington 11/12 Delta wide-arbor reel. It has a cork/teflon drag system and a large drag knob for easy

access when the action gets hot. For flies I settled on a series of Clousers that were tied by my tarpon-fishing guide in Costa Rica. There was not a lot of information about what worked locally because, I repeat, nobody fly fishes there.

Kauai is the top of a mountain that sticks up from the ocean floor. It is an almost round disc of green about 40 miles in diameter. The drop-off around the island is incredible. There really are no shallows here. Within a mile from the shoreline you are in 1,200 feet of water and it quickly drops off to more than 6,000 feet! These conditions are the reason for the great surfing along this coast. They also make it a great fishing ground for pelagics.

Once we rounded the breakwater, we immediately started looking for the age-old sign of schooling fish—diving birds picking up leftovers from foraging predators. Singer was the first to sight them a half mile to the south. Keener turned the boat and headed in their direction. Singer cleared the decks and we got ready. The rod bent to the task and the heavy fly line streamed through the guides. Almost immediately we had the strike described earlier. We were into a big school of fish.

The second mahi-mahi couldn't resist the pink offering on Mary Gayle's line. As with the first fish, it took off in a screaming first run. A seasoned veteran of the fishing wars, Mary Gayle fought the fish as the three of us cheered her on. It is not an easy task working a fish in the huge swells that moved the boat hither and yon, but she let the line run when appropriate and reeled it back when she could. Soon another big mahi-mahi came to the rail.

When the action slowed a bit, Keener headed north along the island, looking for tuna. The two Volvo Penta 200-hp engines moved the 30-foot Wilson easily through the eight-foot rolling swells. This boat provides a very stable platform in heavy seas.

Mary Gayle had two of Keener's rigs out trolling while I worked the fly rod.

Her outfits consisted of Shimano Tioga 80s with 40-pound test mono. On the terminal end she had a pink-skirted hook they called a pink duster that was worked surprisingly close to the stern. I was still fishing a black/red streamer with a silver trim that gave it a bit of shimmer as it moved through the water.

We headed for a flock of birds that were busting the surface about a mile from where we caught the mahi-mahi. As soon as we got there, Mary Gayle hooked up. The rod bent and the reel hollered as our first tuna of the day went flying off toward the distant shoreline. These silver footballs are a wonder to see skipping through the water, oval-shaped muscles exacting all they can from their bodies. My companion bent to her task as the skipjack (aku) fled.

With her feet braced against the motorwell, Mary Gayle got her back into it. With a rhythm learned from many battles in the chair, she worked the rod and reel to tire the fish. It was not long before this soon-to-be sushi came to the side of the boat.

A powerful tuna on a fly rod is every fly fisherman's dream. With a fly rod that had wonderful flexibility but a core of



**Pull, Mary Gayle!**

**Mate Howard Singer and the author showing off the first catch of the day**





Mahi-mahi on a clouser

unequaled strength, I could feel every twitch as these rockets with fins blasted through the deep blue, the green fly line making a gurgling vee as it sliced the surface.

After seven hours of fishing, we headed back toward the harbor. Seven mahi-mahi and five tuna boated with a couple of break-offs. Not bad for our first trip to fly fish in Kauai. I had no idea what to expect when we started out, but now I know that this small island should be a fisherman's destination. This garden paradise just happens to be a fisherman's paradise as well!

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David Sartwell, a Vermont native, is an avid fly fisherman, skier, hunter, gun dog trainer and photographer. A former professional bear hunter and bird-hunting guide, Sartwell has written hundreds of articles and columns in a variety of newspapers and magazines and his work has appeared in several books.



### Kauai, Hawaii

Kauai is a small island and a place of exquisite beauty. Almost all of the center and northwest side of this garden paradise is protected through nature reserves. It is in these forests and along these hard-to-reach beaches that the photographer and hiker can find the Hawaii that piques the imagination.

#### The Napali Coastline:

This is only for the experienced hiker. The climb in and out of this absolutely gorgeous area is steep and arduous. For example, the trail that leaves from the Ha'ena State Park rises 1,300 feet vertically in the first half mile! The reward for your efforts is a continuum of absolutely spectacular views.

#### Weimea Canyon:

There are two routes to the end. Take one up and the other back. Explore side roads. Walk the Alakai swamp trail.

#### Seventeen Mile Beach:

The beach is right out of a deserted island movie. It runs stright into a gigantic vegetation-lined set of cliffs that bar you from going farther north but can be the backdrop of some awe-inspiring photographs.

#### Kilauea Point National Wildlife:

This popular refuge plays host to a wide variety of migratory and resident seabirds. This is one of the top five refuges in the United States in annual visits.

#### Taro Fields:

The Taro Fields are located in a valley just northwest of Princeville on the way to the beach and are a photographer's delight. Try to capture the Nene as they fly over from the freshwater ponds.

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