An aerial photograph of a vast school of fish in the ocean. The fish are densely packed, appearing as a textured, shimmering surface of dark blue and black. The water is a deep, clear blue. The fish are moving in a coordinated pattern, creating a sense of dynamic movement. The overall scene is a breathtaking display of natural behavior.

EYES IN THE SKY

#1

By Gary Graham



Fish spotting has been around for decades. According to an *Anchorage Daily News* article that quotes *Aerial Age Weekly*, fish spotting was used as early as 1920 off the coast of Virginia when “every morning at 5 a.m., a flying boat carrying a pilot, radio operator and fish spotter leaves the station to aid fishing craft.”

There was some mention of “Fish Spotting with Aircraft” just as WWII was getting underway in the early ‘40s. Then, according to the article, in the early 1950s, there was a note in *Pacific Fisherman* about Fish and Wildlife finding aerial spotting of fish to be a valuable tool, particularly for spotting salmon in Bristol Bay.

The commercial use of fish spotters or the hiring of small aircraft by specific boats to lead them to their catch did not become popular until the 1970s in Alaska, as the herring season shortened and the opportunity to catch large quantities was limited. Critical to their success, the local fleets became dependent on aircraft as a tool to find the schools quickly.

Almost simultaneously, the use of airplanes for sighting and harpooning of swordfish in California emerged.

A small but vastly important segment of the recreational and commercial sportfishing communities thrives here in Southern California and below the Mexican border.

A relatively small squadron of privately owned aircraft engaged in fish spotting for hire is often seen flying low over the waters in search of schools of sardine, anchovy, mackerel, bonito and herring, as well as tuna – yellowfin and bluefin – and squid. In the summer and fall, you will see them searching the waters for swordfish, too.

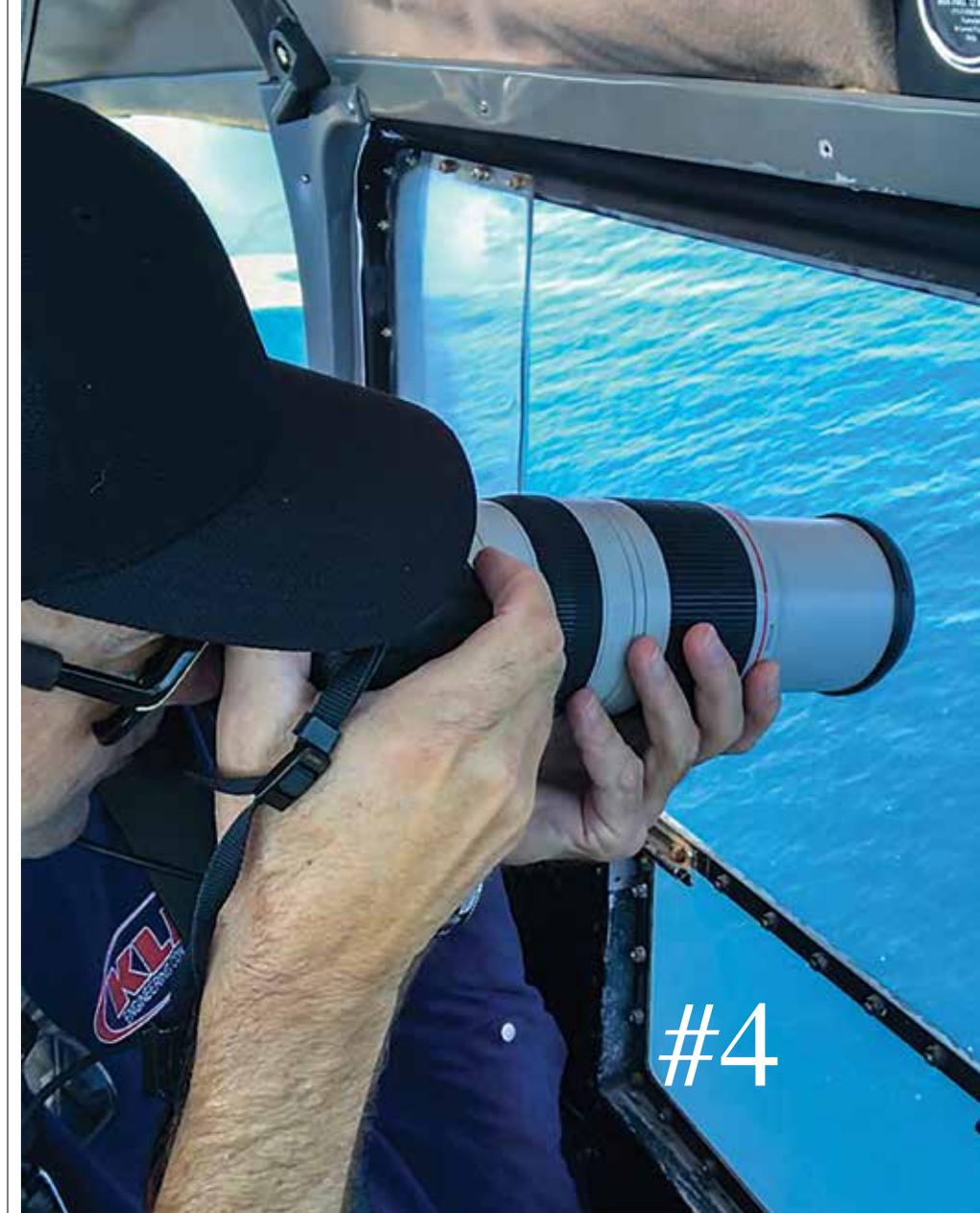
One of those early fish-spotting pioneers was Tom Greene, born in 1951 on a ranch 15 miles outside of Fowler, Kansas. His childhood was filled with hunting. “We always had a gun in the pickup and hunted quail, ducks, pheasants, geese and coyotes.” Even when he was doing chores, he was still dreaming of hunting.

When he was 13 years old, he was invited to visit his uncle – sport and commercial fisherman Capt. Bud Sears – who operated his boat *Invader* in San Diego.

Sears earned the reputation as an excellent angler, as well as one of the best swordfish harpooners on the West Coast. He was active in the San Diego Marlin Club, served as president in 1961, and was the first in San Diego to use an airplane for spotting swordfish.

Greene spent the entire summer on Sears’ boat that year and thought of it often as he completed his schooling. After graduation, he continued college for three semesters. During spring break, he hitchhiked to California.

Sears invited him to come out for



the summer and work on the boat, promising him an excellent summer job making good money, an offer that sounded exciting to Greene. He drove to California the day after school finished in 1970, worked all summer, and decided to make California his home.

Greene appreciated Sears’ mentoring and patience. Over the next two years, Greene thrived in his newfound profession. “Every time the plane flew, my job began. I worked on the boat for two years, and those years were life-changing for me. They were a gift from Sears that provided me with an opportunity in the growing commercial fishing industry in Southern California. He was one of the best and most admired individuals in the industry.

“It satisfied my love of hunting in an entirely new environment,” Greene recalled, “and provided me with a solid foundation.”

After the end of the second season, Greene entered pilot school. The day after he graduated



and received his license, he spotted, and the boat captured, five swordfish on his first day of fish spotting. He confirmed to his mentor, Sears, as well as to himself that with hard work, he could carve out his place in the industry.

That season Greene began working aboard the *Lois Ann* with Capt. Tim Houser, who was just getting started. The rivalry was tough, and as luck would have it, the *Lois Ann* and the *Invader* were constantly vying to see which crew would be the high boat with the most swordfish. Every year it was a matter of who would finish ahead – Sears or Houser?

The teams were always on the cutting edge, trying different ways to figure out a better method to improve their catch. “That was what made it so much fun ... being able to innovate,” Greene remarked recently.

One year, the Houser team was 40 fish ahead. Thinking their lead was insurmountable, they believed they had the season in the bag. They decided to return to Kansas for a pheasant hunt to celebrate their fantastic season, but when they got back to California, they discovered that the season had ended in a flurry, and Sears had nudged the Houser team out of first place by three fish.

Because the swordfish season usually only lasted from midsummer to late fall, Greene often found additional jobs that would allow him

to take some remarkable trips. One season, he agreed to take the *Conquistador*, a 52-foot wooden bait/jig boat that regularly fished out of Newport, Calif., nearly 5,000 miles across the Pacific to the Marshall Islands with George Myatt and several crew members, where they found huge schools of yellowfin tuna.

Greene also managed to find an abundant number of adventures over the years, fitting right in with the “who’s who” of the West Coast of the commercial fishing world that was immersed in the local fishing scene.

There were several research trips with Houser plus seven scientists along with the crew on the *Lois Ann*.



They caught baby gray whales in Magdalena Bay, equipped them with radio collars and tracked them near Boca de Soledad. It was the first time that technique had been tried, and the results were fascinating.

Greene and Milt Shedd, a co-founder of SeaWorld, the San Diego Aquarium and Marine Show, as well as the owner of AFTCO (American Fishing Tackle Company), shared a love for hunting that led to a friendship that lasted until Shedd passed away in 2002.

Greene flew to Cabo San Lucas in 1975 in his small Super Cub to assist in a program for both swordfish and sonar research. In those days, there was little development except for the Finisterra Hotel and Bud Parr’s Cabo San Lucas Hotel.

“We stumbled across a pack of 28 killer whales attacking a blue whale. Shedd had a videographer along who photographed the entire event. The pack spent six hours feeding on the whale until there was nothing left.”

The carnage was horrifying, and it remains etched in Greene’s mind to this day.

At one point, Greene went to Bristol Bay, Alaska, to fly for the gill net fleet. Fishing had been slow for five years in Southern California, so when a couple of his buddies suggested he come to Alaska, he couldn’t resist the lure of another adventure in a new location. As it turned out, it was a thrilling and productive trip. A pro-



lific salmon fishery attracted an astonishing fleet, and 60 airplanes crowded the airspace, spotting the waters below for the 450 gill netters in boats no longer than 32 feet. Some that were slightly longer had literally sawed off part of the bow to meet that requirement.

Regulations were strict, and boats were only allowed to fish one or two flood tides before they were shut down. This fishery was by far the most brutal that Greene had personally witnessed. It was tough work during the six-week season, yet the money was fantastic.

Jan Canetti, Greene’s wife, was no stranger to the fishing industry. Her family had operated Canetti’s



Seafood Grotto and Fish Market in San Pedro for decades. Early in the trip to Bristol Bay, Greene and his wife flew out to check the nets before the season opened. About 80 boats were checking their gear, and as he was flying above a school of fish, among many other airplanes crowding the sky, she tapped Greene on the shoulder and said, “Take me back!”

It wasn’t a big deal; the airport was a mere 5 miles away. However, after Greene turned off the engine, he asked, “What’s up?” And his wife replied curtly, “There is no reason for both of us to get killed!”

That was pre-week – before it became crazy with 450 boats and 60 airplanes in the air.

Greene returned to California and began

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#8 Right

fishing with the San Pedro Fleet in 1978. Now, he recalls, "I am astonished at how fortunate I've been. My timing has been perfect, as I managed to participate in the prime time of the best of the fishery.

"Working with the seiner fleet, I fished for it all – anchovy, mackerel, sardine, bonito, yellowfin, bluefin, and squid! They were filling the holds of the boats with anchovy every night. It was indeed one of the most amazing fisheries in the world!

"We would take off at 2 a.m. in the morning, and by the time we returned to the airport at dawn, the group we worked with would've caught over a thousand tons," Greened said.

"And this would happen five nights a week. We often spotted stringers of anchovies 5 miles long and from 100 to 200 yards across. A boat running across the string would be marking 20 fathoms of fish. All those boats held from 80- to 120-ton capacity. Working a little tiny corner of the enormous spot, every boat would have a load. It was the same way with Spanish mackerel. They made a living at Cortez and Tanner Banks. It was like factory work! But it finally came to an end when the anchovy market price dropped to \$38 a ton in the late '80s."

Tony "Bimbo" Marinkovich, a lifetime resident of San Pedro, helped revolutionize the industry in 1953 when he started Aerial Fish Spotting with an airplane. He operated AFS service throughout the years, working with multiple boats in San Pedro as well as parts of Latin America. For several years, he and Greene worked together as partners.

Bobby Bacon and Greene also partnered for a while. "He had a remarkable set of eyes," Greene said recently. Once, they were out at the same time flying nighttime when Bacon radioed the fleet that he had found approximately 200 tons of bluefin tuna by San Nicholas Island, each weighing 15 kilos.

Greene summoned Bacon on a different VHF radio channel and scolded him for revealing the weight of the fish. He pointed out that estimating the weight of the fish at night was a no-win proposition. If the fish weighed less, the captains would

think he was full of it and didn't know what he was doing, and they would never believe him again.

However, later that evening, the captain confirmed that the fish they caught were, in fact, in the 15-kilo class. A mortified Greene never questioned Bacon's judgment again.

Tragedy struck on Nov. 17, 1990. While spotting for a commercial fishing boat, Bacon was flying his Cessna 172 alone and slammed his single-engine plane into the center of San Clemente Island and died.

Carl Sbarounis was a local who also had a passion for the work. Born in 1960, He loved being on the water, and fishing was his passion. He fished for swordfish with one of his schoolteachers, Darrell Deck, during season and continued until he graduated from high school in 1978. He ran the boat for a year before the owner sold it.

In 1979, he began working at a shipyard, fishing off and on mostly during the summer. However, Sbarounis moved on after the season ended. Around 1980, Sbarounis began to work in construction.

In late 1984, it became legal for airplanes to spot for swordfish. He and the owner discussed hiring a spotter plane for the operation. As an experiment, they called a spotter plane over to show him a swordfish, and after repeated attempts, the pilot failed to see it. Sbarounis and the owner finally gave up, and they stuck the swordfish that the pilot was unable to see. The fish was 100 feet in front of the boat – finning high and dry.

After much discussion, they decided that Sbarounis should go for a pilot's license himself – strictly for swordfishing.

When swordfish season ended, Sbarounis began studying. He and the boat owner each purchased a half-interest in the airplane, a 1974 Citabria.

The arrangement worked well, and after several years, Sbarounis bought out his partner, Deck, and began working for other boat owners off and on as volume and prices fluctuated. During that time, he was still working in construction with his brother, John. He usually finished by 1 p.m. at the latest, and then he would fly out to the fishing grounds



and spot swordfish as late as 8 p.m.

It was inevitable that Greene and Sbarounis would cross paths.

“Carl is a hell of a fish-spotting pilot with a great set of eyes like no one else in the industry,” Greene said. “He’s also a great photographer. We became partners sometime after Bobby Bacon was killed in the crash.”

Late September 1988, the swordfish action slowed in local waters. Drift net boats were catching fish at night in Morro Bay, and boats saw them finning all over the place during the day. That intel was enough to suck a fleet of 10 plank boats up to Morro Bay to check it out.

Sbarounis, a young pilot looking for action, decided to head up to see for himself on one of those beautiful, sunny Santa Ana days – with slick, calm water. He maneuvered his aircraft toward Gull Island, then set his course between Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz Islands at 2,500 feet. He attempted to raise one of the fleet boats to ask them if they needed a pilot.

Looking down, with the sun off to the left, he watched the plane’s shadow on the right as he flew along. He spotted some chevron shapes moving just below the surface in grease slick water; the fish were leaving a wake but they were not porpoising. He zoomed in on them with the binos, and they were huge! He began a tight spiral downward and, stunned, he realized it was a wolf pack of monster-size tuna.

Knowing that a seiner-pilot friend was out fishing, he contacted him to see if he could borrow a seiner. Meanwhile, he heard a couple of plank boats on the radio complaining that the wind was blowing 25 knots at Morro Bay, and they were drifting while they waited for the winds to subside.

So, he turned around, flew back down to Point Dume to find his seiner-pilot buddy who was setting on mackerel; it was hazy, and the visibility was poor. Sbarounis made contact, telling his buddy



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#10 middle

#11 bottom left

#12 Bottom right



about the tuna. His buddy replied, "They don't loan out boats."

That night, a couple of boats raced up to the zone to find the monster tuna. They located them, but couldn't catch them during the day. They kept track of them until the "dark moon" phase, when a few of them scored big time, landing behemoth bluefin tuna weighing from 600 to 1,000 pounds, while some seiners only received blown out nets for their efforts. As a footnote: Greene and his group located the massive bluefin once again the following year near San Nicolas Island. One night, they landed 18 tons of the monster tuna, netting them a record-setting payoff for the night of \$1 million.

Sbarounis' construction business thrived, and he continued to freelance swordfish spotting with different boats throughout the late summer/fall season.

In 1993, a friend called to tell him that the owner of the *Pilikia*, Fred Duckett, and his skipper, Capt. Gary Sanson, wanted to hire him. When interviewing, he made it clear that he wasn't interested in being a corporate pilot because his aircraft was too small. Nevertheless, they agreed to

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Sbarounis even accepted an offer from Roger Hillhouse to fly for seiners on the East Coast. For a couple years, 2002 and 2003, Sbarounis flew his airplane in July or August cross-country to New Bedford, Mass., – spotting bluefin tuna there for the summer, then returning home. After the second year, Sbarounis decided that he could earn the same amount in his home waters and sleep in his own bed to boot.

Ironically, that year the bluefin market collapsed in the Massachusetts area.

Greene’s foray into the “Baja Aqua Farms” below the Baja border was rewarding. Established in 2000 and located along the west coast of Baja California, Mexico, it soon became the leader in bluefin tuna ranching. The company boasts 2,991 acres of farming locations distributed around the west coast of Baja, which allows for the farming of Pacific bluefin tuna year-round. It has become the largest company of its kind in the world.

Sbarounis settled into a routine of flying with the seiners seeking daytime bluefin, mackerel, or whatever, with no total commitment to anyone, except to the *Pilikia* and his main guy, Capt. Sanson. Greene had been with the Baja Aqua Farms for almost a decade when he invited ca to fly for the fleet in 2008. “Partner up with me,” he suggested to Sbarounis. “We are going to catch a lot of fish this year!”

Sbarounis said, “I fished for bluefin for eight years, then they didn’t need me. So, I began working with the So Cal purse seiners and sport boats for swordfish. took care of the Mexico fleet, while I took care of the U.S. fleet, along

hire him the following year.

The year before Sbarounis began flying for them, their total number of swordfish was 56. His first year with the team yielded 265 fish, his second year produced 211, and during his third year, they totaled 200 swordfish.

Throughout the ’90s, Sbarounis kept busy with summer swordfish, along with the 16-boat seiner group at night, and sardine and mackerel during the winter. Plus, he built houses at the same time; it was a tall order!

Meanwhile, a friend, Ted Dunn, offered Green an opportunity in the late ’90s to fly for the new Tuna Pen Operation below the border.

Not long after, the San Pedro canning facilities were moved overseas, and the 40 boats in the net fleet were put on a stricter limit. Local self-employed pilots quit the unprofitable business of fish spotting.

#15

with the sport boats. If I happened to see them in the area, we might put them on something.”

He doesn’t work with them fulltime anymore except to help Greene out with his Fish Dope and SAC accounts.

“Ted put the pen operation together in Mexico,” Greene said, “and I enjoy working with someone like him. His innovation throughout the industry has been extraordinary to watch. He made so many adjustments to the pens that had originated in Australia. It used to take all day to offload the fish into the pens. Ted and the team he assembled fine-tuned the process so that three boatloads of fish could be transferred in one day.”

Sears had once observed, and Greene quoted him as saying, “We are not fishermen; we are the last of the market hunters.”

Footnote: Carl Sbarounis, in addition to making his mark as one of the top fish spotters in Southern California and Baja, has developed quite a following on Instagram for his remarkable photos he posts on his account.

www.instagram.com/airpilikia/ 



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