

Turning It On:
Marine Electronics

Lookout Below

Underwater video cameras let you see what's up, down under.

By FRANK SARGEANT,
Editor at Large

You know how it goes. You tow a big, fat, hard-to-get blue runner over your favorite wreck, hoping to lure up a smoker kingfish, and POW! You can see at least four feet of silver flash as the fish cuts off the bait. You reel in the head and try to decide if it's a king, worthy of another bait and another pass, or a barracuda that will probably eat every bait you try to pull over the structure.

If you've got a video camera giving you a look at what's down there, you know for sure what's coming after your baits. And you can record the feed to create some great memories, as well.

The cameras are just slightly larger than a point-and-shoot digital land camera, and with an accessory fin, they can be trolled behind the boat at speeds to 15 mph. They typically come with 100 feet of cable, but you can buy the cable as long as you want it.

The cameras run on 12-volt batteries.



Splashcam Deep Blue Pro ready for deployment, with twin waterproof flashlights.

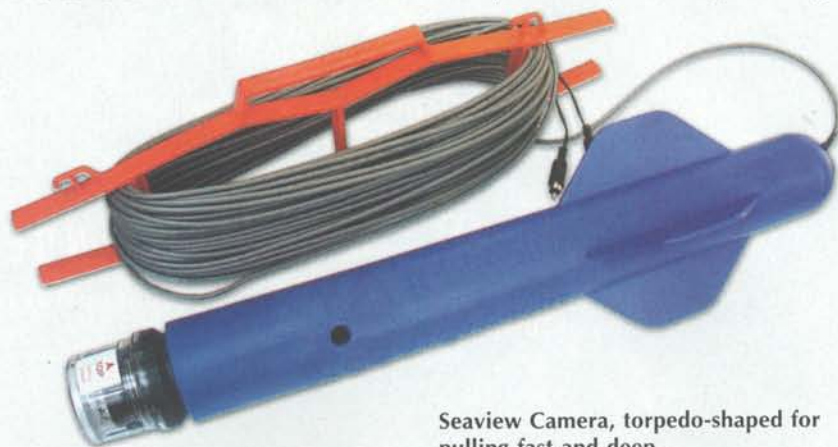
Small portable batteries are available, and these typically last 8 to 10 hours between recharges. Or, you can use a cigarette-lighter plug or alligator clips to tap the power of your boat's 12-volt system. You also need a monitor—a small TV screen or the monitor on a standard video camera will do the job.

The amazing thing on recent models is the price. For just \$125, you can get

a basic black and white model with a 50-foot cable. If you don't have some sort of monitor, that adds about \$40 for the most basic units.

Moving up to color and better definition naturally increases the cost. For about \$2,000 the higher quality models suitable for sportfishing include cable, monitor, camera, trolling fin and carrying case.

They're very easy to use; if you can handle a DVD player, you can hook up a UW video and be watching your trolling baits in short order, or making a drop on your favorite grouper structure to see just how the bottom lies



Seaview Camera, torpedo-shaped for pulling fast and deep.

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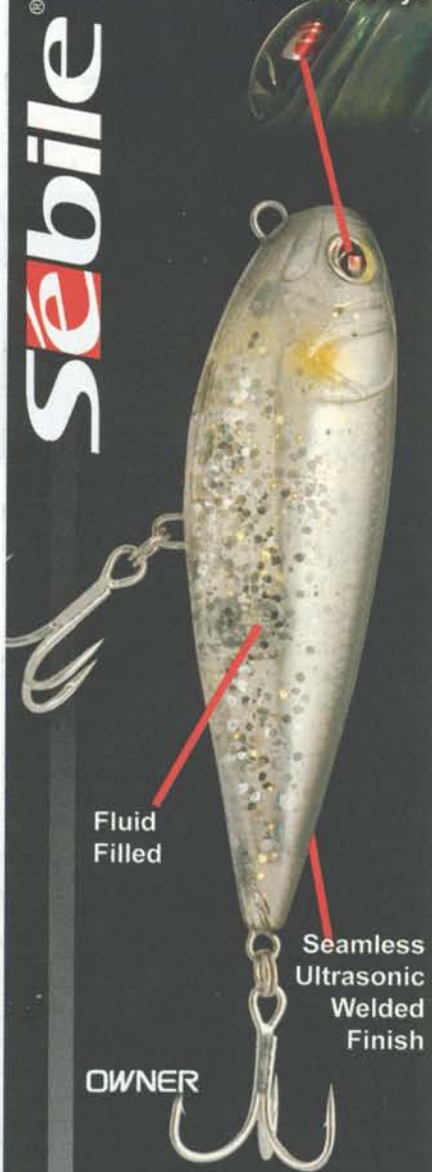
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TURNING IT ON continued



The Splashcam Deep Blue system. With monitor (not shown) rig would be close to \$2,000.

and where the fish are holding. Or check out a wreck to see if the permit or cobia are down there, or a reef edge to sort through the various bottom species for just the ones you want—American red snapper, anybody?

There is, of course, some issue with water clarity. For trolling, the systems definitely work better outside the "green water" belt of nearshore water. Where the water turns inky blue, clarity is much improved, and so is your ability to see fish coming your way. Most camera makers claim optimal visibility to 15 feet in average saltwater clarity, but 20 to 25 feet may be possible in areas like The Bahamas.

Jason Whittle of Splashcam has been using UW video for more than a decade. He notes that one of their practical uses is keeping an eye on how a lure or bait is working.

"You can check out the way your boat speed affects the lure action—for example, how much the action changes when you switch from going with the current to against it. And, of course, if the lure gets fouled or picks up weeds, you can be aware of that right away, too, so you're not wasting trolling time."

Whittle says you occasionally get a few surprises with the cameras. For one, some critters, including big sharks and even giant Alaskan halibut, have been known to swallow them.

"The cables on our models have a working load of 250 pounds and a breaking strength of 700 pounds, so there's not much chance of anything breaking off your camera. The metal sheathing keeps predators from doing any damage to the unit," says Whittle. "It can make some very interesting footage, though."

One venue that immediately comes to mind for Florida anglers is Boca Grande Pass; viewing those massed tarpon—and the big sharks that shadow them—would be memorable for sure.

Whittle says that most fish don't seem put off by the camera being towed

through the water ahead of the bait, even though the lure has to be within 15 to 20 feet of the unit for the video to record the bite.

"We have had some reports of fish being put off by the lights," says Whittle. "We get a good salmon bite early in the morning here [in his home waters of the state of Washington] and that definitely slows down if you turn on the lights to try to get some recordings."

Also, users report that managing the camera can take an extra pair of hands; when you hook up on a big fish, you're going to want the camera and downrigger up out of the way. This means one crewman handles the cables, the other the rod.

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