

How to Catch Cobia

The first time I saw a cobia I thought it was a shark. I was around 14, and had been fishing here a couple of years. Catching trout in cold streams is a very beautiful thing, and one that's still burned in my memory and my love for the sport as any snook, tarpon, or wahoo that's burned out expensive equipment. I could probably still tie a decent nymph if I had to. But that day in Anclote Key, when that three-foot-long thing slammed a pinfish we had under a bobber for redfish, I knew I wasn't in Pennsylvania anymore. We lost the fish in about twelve seconds. The drag was *way* too tight, we were two kids with no idea of what we were doing, and the fish went on to live his short life.



This picture shows Captain David Rieumont on the left holding this beast of a cobia. The fish was taken -- and quickly released -- from Captain Wade Osborne's Shaeffer, Affishianado. His fishing style and personality are well-known among Bay anglers. He's a true pro and we're glad to have him contributing to our lives. If not to our web site :) The fish look much like a shark does when they're in the water; that big white stripe will let you identify the species. If not for that, you have to be almost on top of them before you see the shovel-nose that makes their heads so unique.

Finding Cobia

When temperatures are high enough, cobia start showing up all over inshore waters. Like all fish, cobia behave in a certain way. The way they act and the kind of bait they're likely to eat are somewhat easy to forecast. Finding cobia and learning how to catch cobia is fairly easy as long as you keep these things in mind. Remember: knowing how to catch cobia is only half the battle; being ready to catch them (if and when you *do* find them) is what we're going to focus on. But for now, let's think like a cobia for a moment. If you think like a cobia, you're going to think about a few simple things.

- **Where do I find food?** Where is food, and how can I get there.
- **How can I eat food with the least amount of effort?** I'm big, slow, and quite frankly pretty lazy. I'll leave the stupid part out. I'm just a kid, after all. I ain't a 40" snook that knows what colors are in the latest line of MirroLures.

What Do Cobia Eat

Cobia love crabs most of all. In fact, that's what the old-timers called them: *Crab Eaters*. A wonderful and fairly repeatable way to catch them year in and year out is to put a quarter or half of a blue crab in the surf with enough weight to keep it pinned to the bottom. They run the troughs along the beach as they move north in the springtime and south in the fall. But they love pinfish, and they love eels. Pinfish you can find, eels made of plastic are what we're going to talk about in a minute; they're arguably the easiest way to catch cobia if you didn't have the time or forethought to put four-inch pinnies in your live well.

Like any opinion, this is only worth my butt, (and will be challenged by the editor), but when I think of teaching people how to catch cobia, the following baits -- and in the following order -- come to mind:

1. Blue crab
2. Live pinfish
3. Big plastic eels
4. Live threadfin or whitebait
5. Anything that wiggles, especially if it smells bad

Structure

When a cobia's thinking about where to find food, they're not different than any other fish. They know that their target food knows they're the target. They're hiding before Mr. Cobia even opens his fishy eyes in the morning, smokes a crab leg, and starts thinking about his stomach.

Cobia, though, aren't behaving like snook do. Sometimes snook are moving, but they tend to not move fast. A snook isn't moving four hundred or maybe 800 miles in a single season like a cobia is. That said, cobia look for structure that bait's moving past, and will continue to show up at least twice a day. A seawall is one place. Big bay markers are another. You won't find a forty-inch snook sitting tide-side-down with his face into the tide waiting for anything unlucky enough to swim by his big gaping mouth. They're smarter than that. Although they could if they wanted too, they tend to eat differently, and live their lives moving in much smaller geographical regions. Big markers and buoys are the first place you should look for cobia and the last place to look for a snook.



An application like this Navionics software for the iPhone can show you -- before you leave the dock -- every marker within 10 miles. Visit them, and you'll have a really good chance of finding cobia. Finding them is one thing. Getting one into your boat for a gentle release -- or onto your table for the incredible steaks they generate -- is another. Being ready for them when you find them is an important part of the equation. You shouldn't think you're gonna start tying knots when one passes near your boat.

Near-shore, and even within the body of the bay, cobia also tend to hang around wrecks and large-scale underwater structure. You come across them sometimes while grouper fishing. We always advise grouper fisherman to keep a pinfish without any (or just a tiny split shot if the tide's too strong) weight. Keeping the bait close to the boat will often land a huge cobia. They often hang out just under the boat near the shadowline. Every time you slam that stupid elbow of yours on the boat, or accidentally kick that cooler for the nineteenth thousandth time, they dart away; but they'll be back. Keep quiet and keep a live pinfish right alongside your grouper boat

eight or ten feet under the surface and you just might be surprised at what happens.

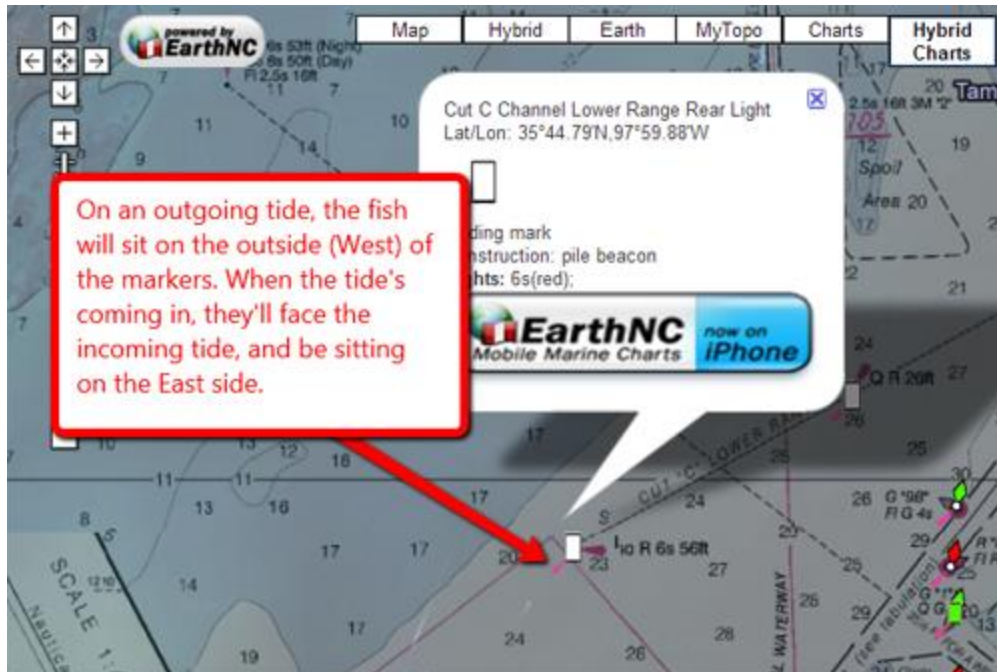
You will find cobia around:

- **Big Markers.** Look for cobia sitting near the primary channels. I've caught them all the way out to the Whistler, miles outside the Skyway and Tampa Bay. But the most likely spots you'll find them the fastest is by markers right outside your marina.
- **The Flats. Watch for big leopard rays. They often have a cobia or two following them. One's big -- that's the female, and the other is faster and smaller. It's the horny male. Cobia spawn in the fall, and often run in pairs or small groups on the flats. You'll see them near manatee sometimes, too. It's almost like they follow moving structure.**
- **Wrecks.** Watch for them on wrecks and offshore structure. Again, if you're grouper fishing, keep a pinfish with very little weight right alongside the boat. And for God's sake, keep quiet. You're already making too much noise; trust us.

Cobia are Lazy Fish

Like our friend Mr. Cobia tells us: (in fact all predators tell us) It's easier to sit in the right place waiting for dinner to swim by than it is swimming around like a nutcase looking for them. If you're a tuna, bluefish, Jack Crevalle, ladyfish or mackerel gathering in huge, open-water schools and circling bait, or driving vast schools of it closer to the surface so you can eat them till you vomit, your behavior shows. Watch for diving birds, and you find open-water predators. Close-water predators don't behave that way. They sit and wait.

They sit with their faces into the oncoming tide. That means that if the tide's coming into (let's say) Tampa Bay, the water's coming in from the West. That's the direction the fish are facing, and where you'll find them sitting in the water (or often circling around on that side of the marker).



This image is from our built-in fishing navigation tool from NCEarth. The product is wonderful, and can be used much like GoogleEarth (our primary mapping application for our Fishy Spots maps). With a SmartPhone and within satellite range, you can use it on your boat. You can also share locations and trip maps with friends, calculate distances between your favorite fishing holes, and generally get even more addicted to that \$300 telephone/computer you hang out with.

Rigging for Cobia

If you are lucky enough to have live pinfish in your boat, simply rig a leader-to-line using a standard surgeon's knot and connect a hook to it. The rigging for a live bait you're throwing at a Cobia you see dark under the surface isn't a lot different than throwing it at a snook you can't see in the mangroves but just *know* is in there somewhere. The bait does most of the work. What we want to focus on for this article is rigging an eel so it works right. A plastic eel is just as likely to catch a lurking cobia as that pinfish is. You might argue the point, but I've been on boats more than one time when they hit an eel after ignoring a pinfish. It's happened the other way, but if we have a pinfish on the boat we always use live bait first; it's only after live bait fails that we try eels. And they often -- a lot of times -- work on the more sensitive of a not-so-careful species.

Tackle for Cobia

The first thing you need is a spinning rod. You can catch them on conventional tackle, and you can catch them on fly-rods, but if you haven't caught them yet, and you know how to use spinning tackle, start with a medium-weight spinning rod -- let's say seven-to-eight foot, and a medium weight reel. Here's an Ohero SG2500 that I'm using. They're just well-priced and work well. Not my favorites, but definitely well-done for the price. It's packed with 15lb test yellow Ohero braid.



The next thing you need is the stuff you need for tying leaders. A good pair of scissors that can cut braid, and a spool of Fluorocarbon leader. I must admit I sometimes use regular mono, and still catch fish, but again, the Ohero line is inexpensive and quite reliable, and a lot of way-more successful fishers than me swear by Fluoro, and use nothing else. I happen to lean towards smaller hooks, too. If you're using pinfish and live bait, you can use something as big as a 3/0, but I tend to keep nothing but #1 or #1/0 hooks.



Ohero FluoroCarbon Leader is inexpensive and worth carrying. The "Braid Pro" pliers were \$20 at one of the booths at the recent Frank Sargeant show; best twenty-bucks I've spent in a while.

There's nothing wrong with using a casting rod for cobia. Some more experienced amateurs -- and a lot of the pros when they're on their own or with friends -- prefer long casting rods with level-wind reels on them when hunting crab-eaters. If you're not experienced using 'conventional' gear (albeit lighter than traditional grouper tackle, let's say), there's a lift you get out of them that is unequalled when you're using spinning gear. Far better for the less experienced, you could definitely fail to turn or stop a huge cobia on a light spinning rod when you could easily have landed and released (or eaten) the fish using an eight-foot casting rod with a Penn sitting on top of it. It's a matter of choice. We prefer spinning tackle ourselves, and use casting gear -- bass gear, to be specific -- when we're dock fishing in the wintertime. The casting accuracy blows away any spinning gear by ten miles.

The Lure: Lead Jigs

The best success we've had with jigs in the olden days were using white bucktail jigs as the heads. I'm sure they would still work as well, and if I was stuck on a desert island with one lure (an old Captain Mel Berman radio topic), if I couldn't choose a sabiki (a leader with small hooks we use to catch big baits like threadfin herring for Tarpon fishing) it would be a white bucktail. But since modern technology brings us modern jig heads like these, pick a favorite. This isn't a review of jig heads; just pick one that will hold an eel correctly.



The thing you have to pay attention to is the fact that the hook -- regardless of the design of the jig head we're using -- stands up the spine of the eel. If it points down the eel doesn't pass over things like rocks or the marker itself. And the eel doesn't swim correctly. Ditto if the hook doesn't come exactly out of the center of the upper spine; something we'll show you how to do correctly.

Putting the Eel on the Jig: Nose First

The first thing you have to do is get the hook into the nose of the eel. To do this, make sure you push the point of the hook -- it's a "J" hook -- into the exact center of the nose of the eel. Think about the fact that the point of that hook is going to come out the upper back of the eel: position it accordingly as you insert the point.

As you can see from these two images, the hook has to be inserted in what appears to be the wrong way (left image). If you can imagine the hook inside the body once you turn it so it comes out the upper spine, you can see why you have to start backwards (so to speak).



The hook inside the body of the Eel

In the picture on the right above, where you see the lead body of the J-hook jig sitting on top of the eel, you can see how that hook shank (whether or not it has lead on it) needs to be when you're done with the rig. It's what makes shoving the hook into the eel seem weird at first; the end justifies the means.

Once you've pushed the point of that hook into the *exact point of the eel's nose*, it's time to push the point of that hook out of the right place on the eel. Remember that picture on the right side showing where the hook would be when you shoved it through?? This is the trick: you have to visually mark the *curve of the hook* and *where it sits*. It's there that the bend has to be made. Compare the images above with this picture. You can see how I have the point of the hook coming out of the *top of the eel's spine*. This is important -- the eel has to look like it's swimming like life eels swim. They don't swim upside down, and they don't lay on their side as they swim. They're upright. So the hook has to come out the right place on the eel's back or it will not swim the way it's supposed to. Cobia are stupid -- granted. But they ain't all *that* stupid that they eat rubber eels swimming against the laws of nature.



The point of the hook has to exit the top of the eel's spine to make it swim properly.

The Finished Product: A Swimming Eel

As we just said, if the hook doesn't come out of the back of the eel's spine, the eel will swim sideways. Will an eel swimming on it's (very tiny) elbow catch a Cobia? Sure it might. But when you're rigging something that's supposed to swim a certain way in its natural habitat, then you need to properly push the shank of the hook through the body, and the point needs to come out where the *curve of the hook was* when you started, and laid the hook shank on the body to determine where the point had to exit.



This shank is covered with a 'barbed' ring on it to hold the bait. It took some pushing to get it positioned properly inside the body of the eel. Remember - this positioning holds true regardless of the soft artificial bait you're using. It's just as important with a 3-inch tail as it is with this eight-inch eel. They're rigged exactly the same.

As the eel slides onto the hook -- and again, it takes some pushing with this jig because of the lead covering the shaft -- you can see the position begin to take place. This eel is going to swim far more naturally than if this hook was even slightly to one side or another:



The point of that hook has to come out exactly where the top of the spine would be in a living eel; otherwise it'll swim leaning to one side or another. Cobia aren't the smartest fish in the world, but they will hit a natural swimmer before they'll hit one swimming on its side. Practice this when you're rigging any soft bait on a jig head (or regular hook, for that matter). Exactly where the point exits is determined when you start -- put the jig above the body to see where it should be when it's inserted. The exit point is always further back than you would have guessed it was going to be. That's why the pictures show the eel as if it's being smooched and bent on the hook; when it's all the way in it'll be perfect. Cobia perfect.

When all is said and done, the eel should hang -- very naturally and very softly -- on the end of the leader. We almost always use loop-knots for artificial baits. I won't stand firmly with 'always'. I don't tie loops when I'm dragging metal for kingfish, for example, or on jigs I'm bouncing for tarpon. It's a waste of time.

How long a leader? That depends on your personal preference. I tend to use shorter leaders -- five foot mostly -- where my partner David Rieumont will re-tie them when they get to six feet from the eight he starts with. He would wager he catches more fish than me, but we don't spend time betting against each other. We both win.

It's cobia season though, and it's time to catch them. If you haven't, you're in for one of the major fishing thrills of your life. We would say that the one mistake we still make is taking them too close to the boat when they're still green. They're incredibly strong fish -- much stronger than you'll think they should have been, with even small 30" fish (that's small, too, although I caught a 12-inch-er in my cast net last year at the Skyway) pulling any drag capable of letting it take line. And like I said in the start of the article, the first one I ever saw snapped off like he was tied to a piece of hair.

Remember though:

- If you have it, **fish with a live pinfish**. Rig it just like you would any live bait; line to leader, and if anything a small piece of split shot. Keep the bait high in the water column.
- **If you don't, use a plastic eel**. Make sure you rig it so the eel swims naturally. It will dramatically improve your hookups. When you see the cobia, toss the bait five feet in front of his head in the direction he's moving, and start reeling. He'll eat it nine-times out of ten.
- **Go to the big markers**. You could plan a day to target them, pick a circle of markers, and work it. You'll find a cobia at one out of ten. Some days there will be three fish on every one. We've seen it. Watch for tripletail, too -- another species bound for the table. If you see a Trip, you're better off with live bait though. And the fish are going to be positioned so the tide's coming into their faces; if it's coming in, they're facing west. If the tide is going out, they're looking towards the land.
- **Keep a pinfish in the water close to the boat if you're grouper fishing**. They're young, not very intelligent, and curious. The combination often results in their hanging right directly under your boat five feet down. You scare them and don't even know they're there lots of times. Try it.
- **Don't forget to fish the beaches**. Something we haven't talked about is fishing for crabeaters on the beaches. Try fishing with weight on the bottom in the trough that runs along the beaches. Use quartered blue crab and hang out with a Kindle or a regular old good book. You never know what the second chapter might hold :)

When you're done, that eel (or any soft bait) should hang naturally with no kinks or curves or unnatural bends. If it has them, back the point of the hook into the body halfway, and pull it back. You're either pulled the point

out to close to the nose or too far away. Again, if you start with the hook laying over the body, like we did when we first started the article, it will go into the center of the nose and out the upper spine perfectly -- right where the curve showed you it would.



The finished 'product' should hang loosely on the leader. We're using a loop knot introduced by Rapala