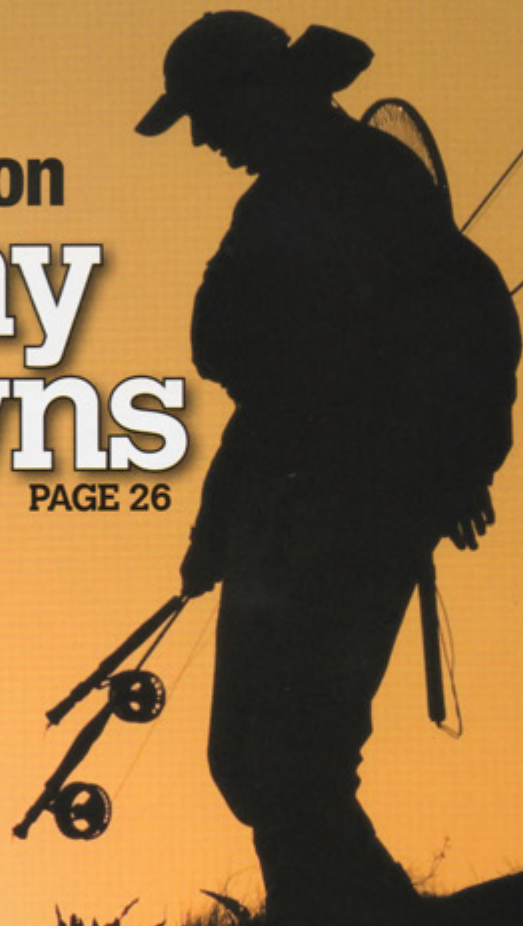


# AMERICAN ANGLER

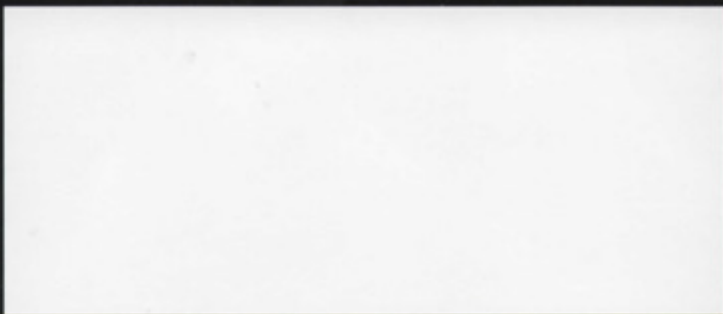
THE FLY-FISHING AUTHORITY

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# Cobia Craze



**C**obia season is a long-awaited spring ritual for fishermen from the Gulf of Mexico to the Carolinas, stirring the emotions of saltwater anglers like few other species of game fish. It's not unusual for serious cobia chasers to have a \$50,000 boat exclusively outfitted for cobia, and when the migration begins, hardened guides travel vast distances

to chase nothing else but these magnificent and mysterious fish.

Cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*)—also known as ling, brown fish, and lemon fish—are the sole member of the scientific family Rachycentridae. They are easily identified by their wide, flat head, dark brown coloration with white underbelly, and a distinct lateral stripe extending from the eye to the tail.

Cobia are common to both Atlantic and Pacific waters, preferring water temperatures ranging from 68 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit. They are solitary fish until spawning begins in late spring, which coincides with prime time for fly anglers to target this powerful game fish.

Everywhere they occur, cobia constitute one of the largest species of fish readily available to inshore fly fishermen. Anglers in the Gulf of Mexico report cobia in excess of 100 pounds, while southern Atlantic anglers regularly catch fish up to 80 pounds. While not all cobia migrate, those that do are athletes. Several tagged cobia have been recaptured more than 12,000 miles from the tagging site. With such a wide range, cobia consume

everything from shrimps and finfish to squids, crabs, and their favorite dish—eels. While on the move, cobia are attracted to objects that offer shade or cover, such as buoy markers, flotsam, boats, channel markers, oil rigs, weed lines, and wrecks. Cobia also enjoy a symbiotic relationship with large rays, sea turtles, sharks, and even manatees, and all these species should be investigated for cobia that might be tagging along in their wake.

## Sight Casting

One of the best tactics for locating cobia is to pick several fixed objects in local waters that have produced cobia in the past, and run and gun those targets. Covering a lot of water often is the difference between seeing cobia or not. Look for slick calm conditions where, for instance, in inland bays you would be able to see prowling cobia as they “push” just under the surface. These conditions also make it easy to find rays, turtles, or other animals that cobia often shadow in their quest for food. Check your local sea buoys, jetty rocks, and piers. If the water is clear, run the

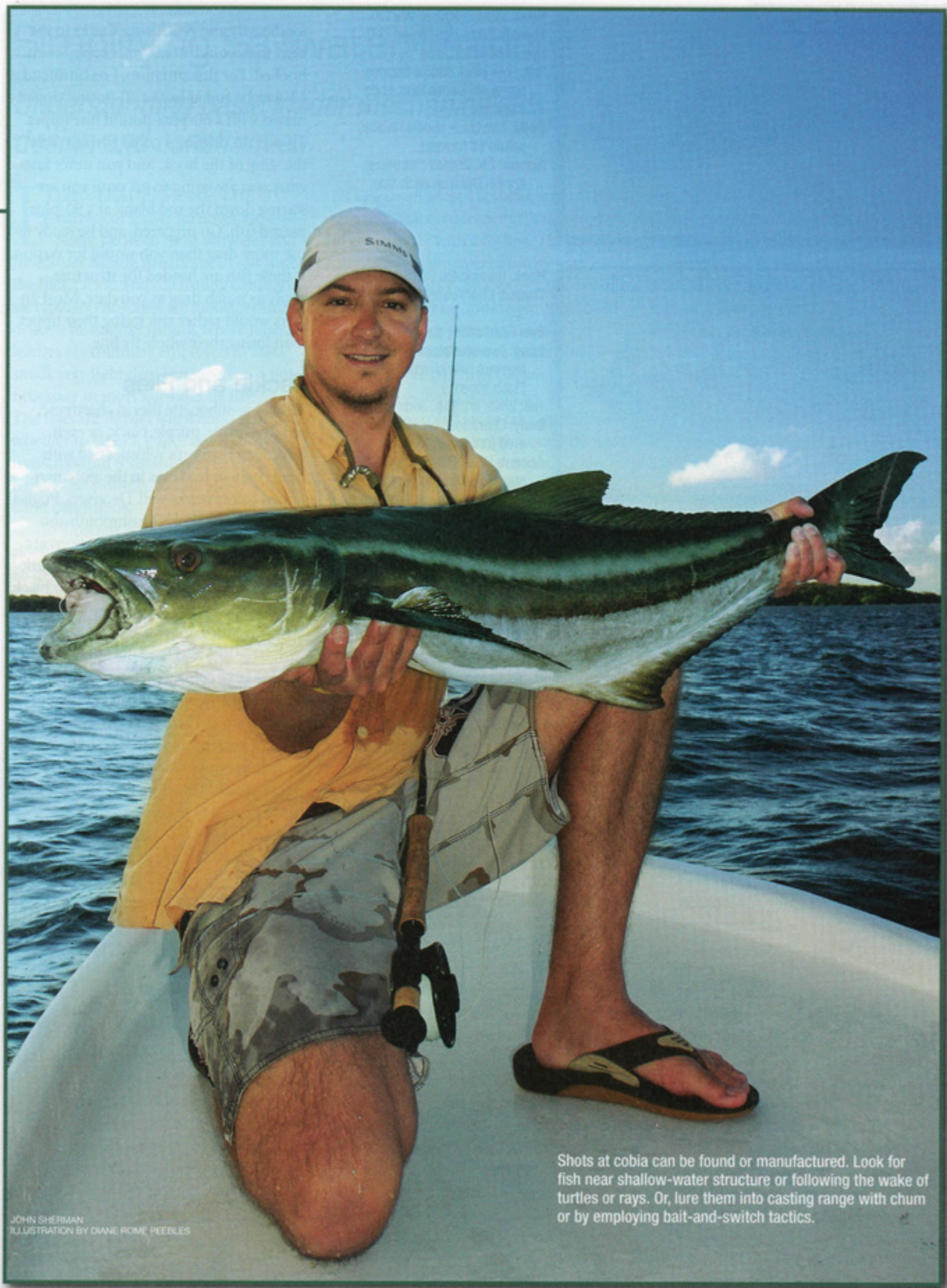
These inshore bruisers are available to fly fishers willing to apply a few specialized tactics—and a lot of backbone.

BY CAPT. SETH VERNON

beaches. Don't worry about cobia being boat shy; think of your boat as the best teaser ever invented, and you're sure to draw some cobia off nearby structures. Once you've located marine structure, look for surrounding marine life that indicates food for cobia. If you don't see a cobia immediately, make a few idling passes with the sun at your back, and try one of these tactics for drawing a cobia within fly range.

The bait-and-switch is a time-honored cobia tactic for fly anglers. First, one angler uses a hookless jig or topwater plug to lure a cobia out of the deep or off of a piece of structure. Hungry cobia will track the teaser and often attack it multiple times. Take the teaser away and cast the fly in its place, and the cobia will usually strike. Hooked cobia will often make repeated runs and even come to the boat “green” to isolate where the pressure is coming from. Some anglers bring cobia on board while they still have fight left in them. Those stories usually end with broken tackle, boats, and even limbs.

The purest encounter for sight fishing to cobia occurs on calm days when it's



JOHN SHERMAN  
ILLUSTRATION BY DWANE ROME, PEBBLES

Shots at cobia can be found or manufactured. Look for fish near shallow-water structure or following the wake of turtles or rays. Or, lure them into casting range with chum or by employing bait-and-switch tactics.

**Lemay's Tarpon Snake**

**Hook:** Tiemco 300sp, size 2/0.  
**Thread:** Black Uni-Thread, 3/0.  
**Eye:** Bead chain, size 3/16.  
**Tail:** Four black saddle hackles five to six inches long, ends matched.  
**Body:** Two black saddle hackles palmered forward.  
**Accent:** Six strands chartreuse, Krystal Flash on each side.

**Dan Blanton's Whistler Chartreuse/White**

**Hook:** Gamakatsu SC15, size 2/0.  
**Thread:** Chartreuse Uni-Thread, 3/0.  
**Eye:** Bead chain, size 3/16.  
**Wing:** Two chartreuse grizzly feathers with chartreuse Krystal Flash accent.  
**Tail:** White bucktail, ends matched.  
**Body:** Chartreuse chenille palmered forward.  
**Accent:** Silver Flashabou, 30 to 40 strands extending past the tail.  
**Collar:** Two chartreuse feathers palmered forward.

The Whistler (shown below) is also effective in yellow bucktail with orange grizzly hackles and orange collar, and in black bucktail and collar with grizzly wing and red chenille body.

easy to see pushing cobia, or cobia in tow with a turtle, ray, or shark. While solitary fish cruising near the surface and creating a push or wave can be more challenging than pairs and trios of cobia, fish exhibiting this behavior are usually hunting. If there is current, position the boat up-tide from the fish, and make a 45-degree shot that leads the fish by several feet. Casting slightly beyond the cobia is ideal. As the cobias intersects the fly, strip in short bursts so that the fly runs perpendicular across the fish's feeding lane and then straightens out, allowing the cobia to track the bait. Should the cobia follow as if in a trance, let the fish overtake and even mouth the fly, and then quickly strip it away. This strategy has helped many anglers get a fish to aggressively strike. Unlike most species, cobia will strike the same fly several times. If the fish doesn't turn on the fly during the short strip, then quickly recast and use a fast strip to elicit a reaction bite. Strategies similar to streamer fishing for trout apply. If you see the push, get in position, and find more than one fish, all the better. More often than not, the competing interest of these fish is your biggest advantage.

When encountering cobia shadowing turtles and rays, I like to throw the fly directly on the back of the host and let the cobia find it, as if the lead animal

disturbed this bait in the water column. It may take repeated attempts to get the cobia's attention, so be persistent. Because this strategy involves moving quickly and making swift, accurate casts, I often opt for a 10-weight or 11-weight rod rigged with an intermediate-tip line mated to an 8-foot leader of 20-pound tippet and a 60-pound fluorocarbon bite tippet.

## Chumming

When fishing structure for heavily pressured cobia, or simply to ensure the fish has an appetite when it swims within range, chumming with menhaden is a time-tested tactic. This oily fish makes an irresistible chum slick, especially when chopped up using a chum grinder. It is important to create the slick on the uptide or upwind side of the structure as the cobia will work their way up current into the slick. This is an excellent strategy for luring cobia away from a wreck where you might not be able to turn them and risk losing your fly line should the cobia retreat into structure. The same casting angles apply. Position the fly so that it travels 45 degrees across the fish's path.


When fishing around wrecks and while chumming, a heavily weighted fly can be a killer. Cobia will dive down in pursuit of a heavy fly to keep from losing it in the deep. Be careful not to chum

too heavily and risk luring sharks to the boat that would attack your cobia when hooked. For this situation, I recommend a 12-weight and at least a 20-pound tippet mated with a 60-plus-pound bite tippet. There's no turning a cobia when it feels the sting of the hook, and you never know what you are going to get until you are staring down the rod blank at a 90-plus-pound fish. Go prepared, and be ready to use more drag than you would for tarpon. If these fish are headed for structure, apply as much drag as you dare. Most anglers would rather risk losing their tippet than losing their whole fly line.

## Tackle and Flies

Think big-silhouette flies in chartreuse, red-and-white, purple, black, or even pink. Dan Blanton's Whistler tied with bead chain or lead eyes in the aforementioned colors works well. Deceivers, Puglisi baitfishes, and Skok's Mushroom also take cobia. Two reliable eel imitations are Lemay's Tarpon Snake in black and Mark Lewchik's Bunny Fly in chartreuse or black. For topwater, throw a Dahlberg's Rabbit Strip Diver or Popovic's Banger. To cast such large flies and have the lifting force to subdue large cobia, I prefer to rig up with an 11- or 12-weight rod and large-arbor 12-weight reel. Having more than 300 yards of backing and a freight-train stopping drag combined with a tarpon-weight intermediate line will give you the confidence needed to put maximum pressure on these fish.

For leaders, I like an eight-foot leader tapered to a 20-pound tippet. A Bimini knot in the class tippet mated to a bite tippet of 60 pounds or larger fluorocarbon leader using a Hufnagle knot is as durable as it is effective. For connecting the fly to the bite tippet, I favor a three- or four-turn Duncan loop, which allows the fly to have better action during the retrieve and will seat nicely when maximum pressure is applied. I have literally broken hooks before I have broken this knot configuration.

From Texas to Virginia and all states in between, cobia are on the move right now. With these proven strategies and some careful rigging, it's all just a matter of putting the fly in front of one of these brown torpedoes this spring. 

Seth Vernon is a North Carolina fly-fishing guide and a regular contributor.