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April 2023



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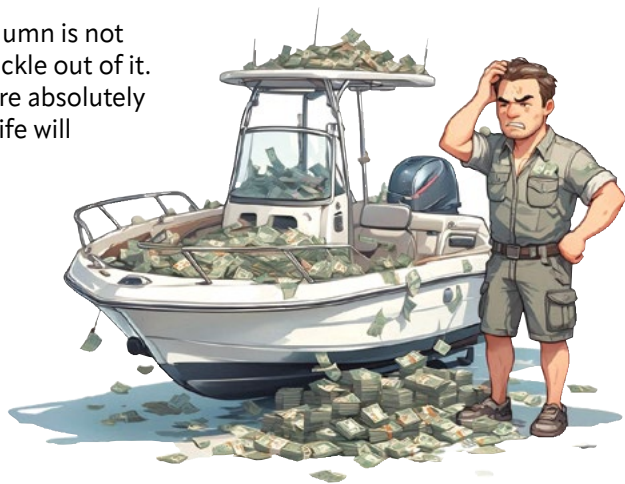
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## IF I ONLY HAD A BOAT

Lots of you readers out there already have boats. This column is not for you, although you might still learn a little or get a chuckle out of it. This column is intended for those of you out there who are absolutely certain that everything will fall right into place and your life will be complete, if you only had a boat. The idea of a boat is just so damn romantic. They give you access to the open seas where you can break the bonds of your work-a-day life and really find true freedom, right?? There are so many different types of boats that there is something for everybody, from the smallest dingy to the largest megayacht. The reality of the boating experience can be pretty close to the heaven described above, or it can come very near to experiencing the fiery pits of hell. It is really pretty much up to you to determine which way your boating experience goes.



The whole experience starts with the choice of the boat. Pick something appropriate for what you want to do and where you want to go. If you have never ever operated or maintained a boat, start small. Small boats are fairly simple, they are easy to get unstuck (if you happen to forget about the tide) and generally, they are cheaper to fix when you do mess up. I have seen far too many people buy a big complicated boat (because they can) and wind up having a hellish time because they exceeded their skill level. New boats can be quite expensive these days, but you do get a dealer who should stand behind them and help with some of the troubles. If a new boat is your choice, look for an established dealer who has been in business for years. Dealers who survived the 2007-2008 economic crash probably offer good service and aren't going anywhere. If you are going for a used boat, make sure that the major systems are in good order. Get a mechanic to check the compression of the motor and find out the hours, when possible. Most marine motors are capable of running way more hours than you might think, I have almost never seen a worn out boat motor, it is corrosion and improper maintenance and misuse that kills them. Don't worry so much about the little stuff like horn, lights, pumps, etc. They are important for safety, but they are generally easy and cheap to fix.

The most important thing to realize is that, while they may seem to have similarities, a boat is absolutely nothing like your car. Boats are produced by hundreds of relatively small manufacturers, not a handful of mega corporations with billion dollar-automated factories. Boats are much more hand crafted than cars and quality of wiring and other critical systems varies widely between builders. Unlike cars, boats also sit for weeks or months at a time during off-season periods. This is a phenomena that I don't really understand in Florida, but despite year round beautiful weather, many of our friends who came here from the North have retained old habits and they only use their boats during spring and summer. Batteries, fuel systems and electronics, like to be used regularly, when they sit, the gremlins creep in. I can't believe how many of our storage customers show up in April after not seeing their boats for 4 to 6 months and just don't understand why they won't start.

Last, but certainly not least, don't be afraid to admit what you don't know. In our rental fleet, we have very few problems with novice boaters who admit their lack of knowledge and ask for instruction. The boaters who have issues are the ones who think that they know everything and are unwilling to listen and ask questions. A USCG Auxiliary or Power Squadron class is a good place to start and these classes teach you the basics of navigation and safe boating, but they are not really able to offer hands on instruction on the water. There are many well qualified boat captains who will be glad to go out on your boat and teach you the in's and outs of boating in our area. Don't be afraid to call on them.

Boats can be a lot of fun, but the best advise that I ever saw about having fun on a boat was to go on somebody else's. If you heed this advise, you are almost certain to have a good time, but don't forget, your buddy's boat runs on gas, not thanks, chip in if you want to ever be asked back.

*Merle & Flip*



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**ON THE COVER:**

Terri Huffmaster with a beautiful "Big Bend Brown Bomber" caught on a recent outing from the panhandle area of Florida. Read more about her Cobia adventures by flipping to page 16 of this issue!

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# OYSTER MOUNDS ARE WHERE FISH ARE FOUND!

by Captain George Hastick

Oyster mounds are like magnets for a variety of fish, especially Redfish. There are multiple reasons why oyster mounds attract fish. One, they are a food source. And, they will also block the current, so that the fish do not have to work too hard to stay in the feeding zone if it is in a high current area. Sometimes even a small oyster mound will hold fish if it is the only structure in the area. Of course, a larger oyster mound will have more surface area to attract larger quantities of fish due to holding a larger food source for multiple species to feed on. A few of the main characters that feed on and around these mounds are Redfish, Sheepshead, Black Drum, Snook, Trout, Snapper, Flounder (in the sandy areas around the oyster mounds) and more.

The reason why it can attract so many species is the variety and sometimes abundance of different food sources. These food sources can consist of crustaceans: Blue Crab, Mud Crab, Stone Crab, Shrimp and barnacles. It also holds mollusks such as mussels, snails and small oysters. There will also be small baitfish and worms, so

there is something for everyone. This is why oyster mounds can be very productive to fish and birds.

How to go about finding oyster mounds in your area? During the winter with the very low negative tides, many oyster mounds will be exposed out of the water and can easily be spotted from a decent distance away. You can also travel around in your boat and look for new oyster mounds but that can take a while to get a bunch found. This is where modern technology can help you find a larger quantity and faster by using Bing maps or Google earth to visually see them from the comfort of home via satellite imagery. If you have an oyster mound that you know of, find it on the map you are using and take notice of the color compared to a nearby sand hole. You will notice it has a slightly different color to it than the sand holes and every image can be a little different color, but they will all be the same color on that image.

Now that you know what you are looking for, you can explore and find more before you ever hit the water to fish. Salt Strong also has an app called Smart Spots which will give you satellite



imagery, so that you can put different layers on it to see different items. One of those layers is oysters. When you click on the oyster layer it will highlight many of the oyster mounds by circling them with a white line. There are many more features and layers to this app, but you must be a member of Salt Strong to get all the high-end features it offers.



Now go out and setup near an oyster mound and let the incoming tide bring the fish to you!

Captain George Hastick of "Fish Hunter Fishing Charters" in St. Petersburg has been fishing the waters of Tampa for over 35 years. From novice to professional; you'll feel like you have been fishing buddies for years. For more info, contact him at 727-525-1005, [www.FishTampa.com](http://www.FishTampa.com).



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## WELLS COVE: A PREMIER BOATING COMMUNITY ON THE ST. JOHNS RIVER

For those who measure quality of life by time on the water, Wells Cove offers a rare and thoughtfully designed opportunity. This exclusive waterfront enclave is a premier boating community located along the banks of the St. Johns River, where riverfront living, privacy, and convenience come together in a way seldom found in today's market.

Wells Cove is intentionally intimate, with only seven homesites planned within a gated setting. Rather than a large-scale subdivision, the community was designed for those who value space, serenity, and a true connection to the water. Each residence includes its own private boat slip, allowing homeowners to move seamlessly from home to boat without the complications of shared marinas or off-site storage.



proximately a 15-minute high-speed run to the Atlantic Ocean and the jetties. This makes Wells Cove especially attractive to both freshwater and saltwater fishing enthusiasts, as well as boaters who want quick access to offshore waters while still enjoying the calm and protection of riverfront living.

Beyond its boating advantages, Wells Cove offers a location that balances privacy with everyday convenience. The community is just minutes from Jacksonville's beaches, providing easy access to coastal recreation and dining. Major destinations such as the St. Johns Town Center, River City Marketplace, and Jacksonville International Airport are all nearby, making travel, shopping, and entertainment simple and efficient.

Homes at Wells Cove reflect the community's upscale character,

with quality construction and coastal-inspired design. Select residences offer buyers the opportunity to personalize finishes and design details, allowing each home to reflect individual taste. Immediate occupancy is available, enabling new owners to begin enjoying the waterfront lifestyle without delay.

Pricing at Wells Cove ranges from \$899,000 to \$1,900,000, representing a compelling value for a gated, private-slip boating community of this caliber. With only seven homes in total, availability is limited, reinforcing the community's exclusive nature and long-term appeal.

Wells Cove is more than a place to live — it is a destination for those who appreciate life on the water. From private slips and rapid ocean access to iconic river views and thoughtful design, this premier boating community offers a lifestyle defined by ease, exclusivity, and enduring value. ■

One of Wells Cove's most compelling features is its exceptional access to open water. From the dock, it is ap-

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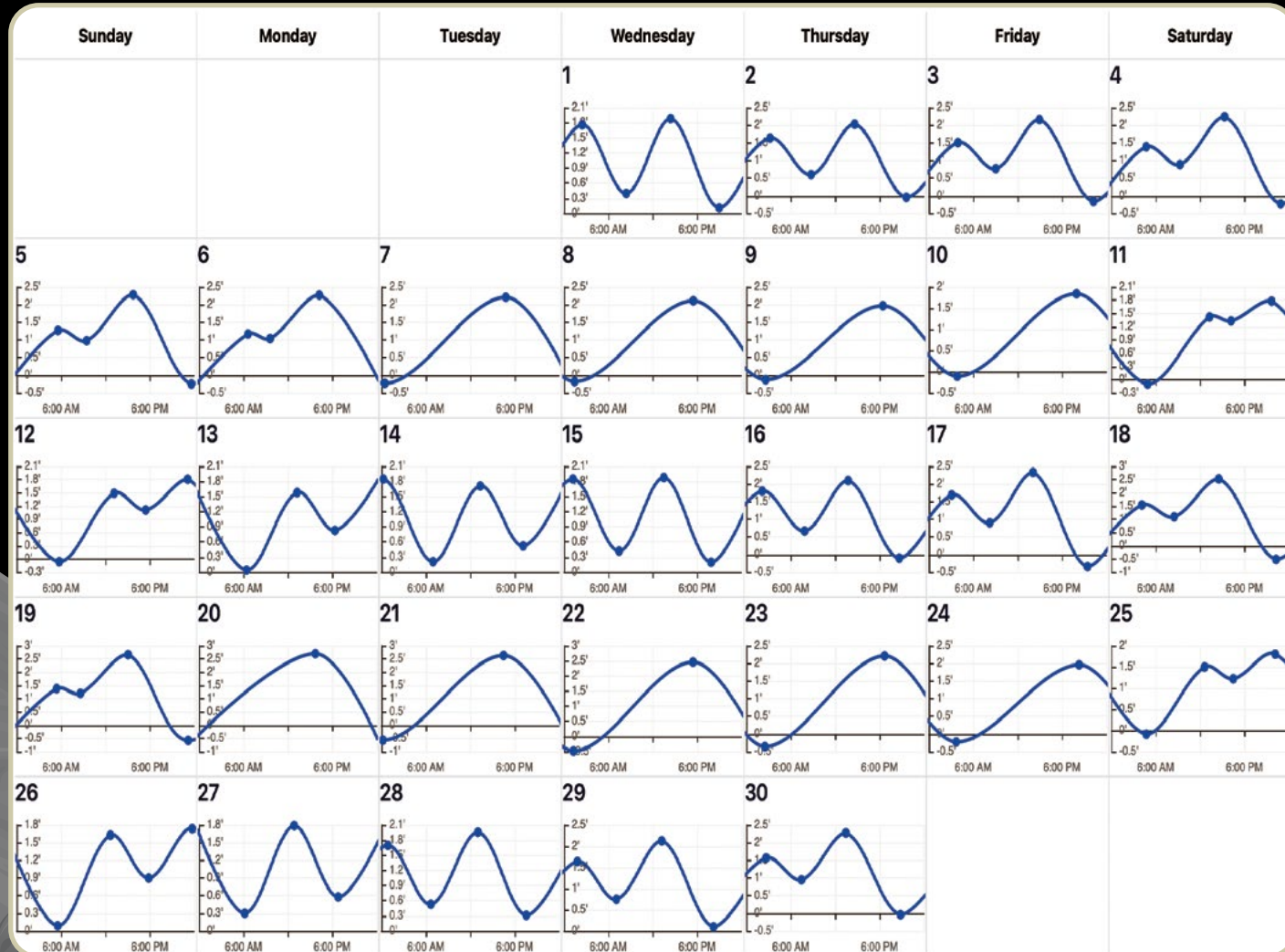
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### Conversions for Clearwater Beach Area

High	Low	Location
-0:02	-0:10	Dunedin, St. Joseph Sound
-0:05	-0:15	Anclote Key, South End
+0:42	+0:42	Tarpon Springs, Anclote River
-0:07	-0:03	North Anclote Key
+0:41	+0:39	Old Port Tampa
+0:33	+0:53	Gulf Harbors
+0:42	+1:05	Hwy 19 Bridge, Pithlachascotee River
+0:50	+1:35	New Port Richey, Pithlachascotee River
+0:36	+0:43	Hudson, Hudson Creek

### Conversions for St. Marks River Area

High	Low	Location
+0:23	+1:18	Everglades City
-1:17	-1:03	Cape Romano
-1:04	-1:08	Marco Island
-1:59	-2:04	Naples
-0:46	-0:09	Indian Bay
-0:59	-0:42	Bayport
-0:25	+0:23	Withlacoochee River

### Conversions for Tampa Bay Area

High	Low	Location
+0:49	+0:58	Gandy Bridge
+1:38	+1:55	Courtney Campbell Cswy.
+1:38	+1:55	Safety Harbor
+0:20	+0:22	Ballast Point
+0:07	+0:26	Hillsborough Bay
+0:21	+0:29	McKay Bay Entrance
+0:41	+0:39	Old Port Tampa
-2:27	-2:24	Egmont Key
-2:53	-2:46	Anna Maria, Bradenton Bch
-2:10	-2:19	Anna Maria, City Pier
-1:24	-0:55	Bradenton, Manatee River
-0:30	+0:14	Redfish Pt., Manatee River
-2:22	-1:58	Mullet Key Channel, Skyway
+0:08	+0:17	Shell Point
-0:22	-0:29	Point Pinellas
-1:34	-1:30	Pass-a-Grille Beach
-1:32	-1:05	Gulfport
-1:18	-0:44	St. Pete Beach Causeway
-2:14	-2:04	John's Pass
-1:40	-1:18	Madeira Beach Causeway
-2:00	-1:25	Cortez, Sarasota Bay
-1:38	-0:58	Sarasota Bay
-2:02	-1:38	Venice Inlet
-0:57	-0:40	Englewood, Lemon Bay
-1:27	-0:59	Placida, Gasparilla Sound
+1:38	+1:56	El Jobean, Myakka River
+1:52	+2:30	Shell Point, Peace River
+1:06	+1:27	Punta Gorda, Charlotte Hbr.
-1:12	-1:56	Boca Grande, Charlotte Hbr.
-0:19	+0:26	Pineland, Pine Island
+0:43	+1:28	Matlacha Pass
-0:55	-1:14	Redfish Pass, Captiva Is.
-0:46	-0:20	Captiva, Pine Island Sound
-2:20	-2:28	Captiva, Gulf Side
-0:25	+0:16	Galt Isle, Pine Island Sound
-0:30	-0:44	St. James City, Pine Island
+2:08	+2:44	Fort Myers
+1:15	+2:02	Cape Coral Bridge
+1:08	+1:40	Iona Shores
+0:51	+0:42	Indian Rocks Beach, ICW

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## FWCFR FLORIDA WEST COAST FISHING REPORT



HOST: Capt. Sergio Atanes • CO-HOST: Capt. George Hastick

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# RODS, REELS & FOOTBALL LEGENDS IN BEAUTIFUL COSTA RICA

by Misty Wells

This July, we are heading to one of the wildest places on earth, the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica, for **The 1st Annual Pura Vida Reel Challenge** that will be held at Crocodile Bay Resort. What is the Pura Vida Reel Challenge? it is an all-inclusive Charity Fishing Fundraiser put together by three non-profits: **The Alstott Family Foundation, Burkey's Believe** and **A Reel Future**.

Of course, if you miss your chance to fish with Mike, I will be next in line to take you out on the water and kick some butt in Costa Rica.

**The Pura Vida Reel Challenge Tournament dates are from July 23rd to July 26th, 2026.**



By only offering 29 spots for this event, we are keeping it high-energy, exclusive, and no holds barred. Once you arrive in San Jose, Costa Rica, you will be met by a representative of Crocodile Bay and escorted to the jet terminal next door. From there you will board a flight taking you on a 45-minute ride over the mountains along the coast

to the Osa Peninsula. Upon arrival, you will be checked in to your full 1-bedroom suite boasting a living room and full kitchen with a balcony overlooking the rain forest.

The fun is just beginning with a welcome "Captain Party" to kick-off the weekend fun with great local food and entertainment in full supply.

This tournament is unique as we are offering two types of fishing. On day one, we are inshore fishing targeting Roosterfish, Snapper, and Jacks. Day two, it's time to head offshore and

target Yellowfin Tuna, Sailfish, Mahi, and a possible Marlin to top things off. Some of the species will be catch-n-release and some will be served as a fresh from the Pacific dinner while at the resort. All you have to do is register on the website, get your flight to San Jose and we take care of the rest.



Crocodile Bay is a 4-star resort with, in my opinion, one of the best waterfall pools in the world. I have never been somewhere before where you can be swimming in the pool with a cold beverage and Toucan, Monkeys and Sloths are all playing around you. Now, I realize there are some folks that would rather stay onshore and explore rather than go fishing all day. Well, the Osa Peninsula has



everything you need when it comes to eco-tourism. National Geographic has coined the Osa Peninsula as "the most Biologically Intense Place on Earth". The peninsula, specifically, **The Corcovado National Park**, houses roughly 2.5% of the entire planet's biodiversity despite taking up only 0.001% of its surface area. What does that mean in "layman's terms"? It means that you will have plenty of things to explore if you are not fishing.

We have also offered a severely discounted all-inclusive price to those guests coming with an angler so don't worry about the costs. On the daily you can decide if you want to chase wild monkeys on the Jeep Tour, go ziplining through the Rainforest or go Whale Watching; in the Osa Peninsula there is so much to do!

For those anglers that are wondering what the fishing is like out of Crocodile Bay, it is some of the best in the world. I love a place where you can depart from the resort and within an hour be fishing just off the beach with scenery in the backdrop that looks like Jurassic Park. When you are fishing inshore, you will be fishing to land your trophy Roosterfish with top quality spinning rods and a great crew walking you through it all the way. Believe it or not, your Inshore trips also target Cubera Snapper, Colorado Snapper and some monster Jacks. All these species earn you points towards the win and some of the catches become dinner that night, as well.

Your offshore day will depart out of the bay as well, but instead of heading

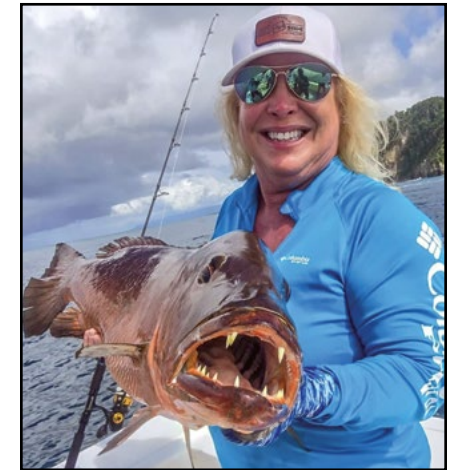
down the coast you will head offshore to deeper waters. The crew will put out the outriggers and start pulling Ballyhoo or lures to put you on the board with a Sailfish, Mahi or Marlin. There is also no shortage of Yellowfin Tuna where you will be, all you have to do it look for the schools of Dolphin, and you will find the "mother load" of Tuna.

Even though we only have 29 spots for guests to attend, we kept the price as low as possible so that we can achieve our goal for the charities. The all-inclusive cost of \$5,000 for this event includes: round trip flight from San Jose, luxury accommodations, fishing for 2 days, the captain's party, Breakfast, Dinner and Lunches along with gratuities for the crew and staff. If an angler is bringing a non-angler, their all-inclusive cost is only \$1,500.00 which includes the shared accommodations and all the trimmings listed above. To be perfectly honest, it's hard to find a package like that anywhere in Costa Rica.

As we all are getting older and time seems to move a warp speed you have to ask yourself how long are you going to put that "bucket list" trip aside? I challenge you to go to the Crocodile Bay website to check out and watch the 4 episodes that I have filmed at Crocodile Bay and if that does not convince you, nothing will! It is time to claim your spot in this "one of a kind" Charity Fishing Tournament and join me, Mike and Steve while you are giving back to charity. This seems like a "win-win" to me, but if you still have questions and want to talk about details, reach out to me at [misty@mistywells.com](mailto:misty@mistywells.com) or go to the Alstott Family Foundation website under events and sign up. Life is meant to be "Pura Vida" and life is meant to be fished.

For more info, please visit [www.crocodilebay.com](http://www.crocodilebay.com) and [www.mikealstottfamilyfoundation.org](http://www.mikealstottfamilyfoundation.org).

**Misty Wells Producer & Host of Award Winning "Let's Take It Outside" TV show airing to 220 million on Discovery & Discovery GO & Plus & 17 other networks. Bass Pro-Outdoor Pro & Outdoor & Outdoor, Travel Writer. Founder of "A Reel Future" non-profit devoted to teaching the passion of fishing & conservation to foster children, over 4,000 children & counting. Watch at [mistywells.com](http://mistywells.com).**

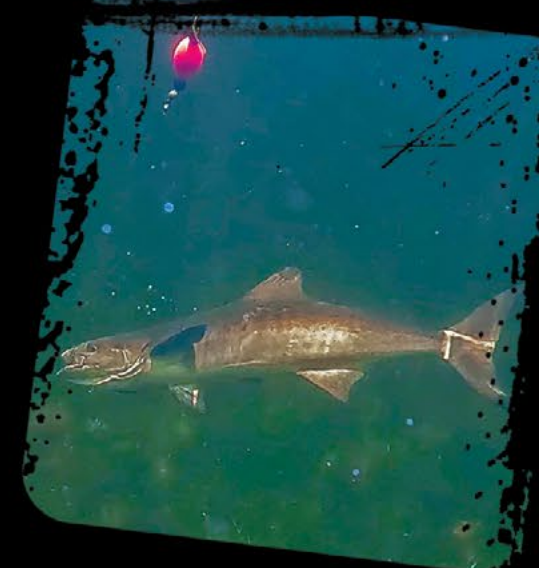




# CHASING COBIA

FROM FLORIDA'S BIG BEND TO THE PANHANDLE

*by Terri B. Huffmaster*



The first time you see a Cobia in the wild, it doesn't quite look real. It's just a shadow at first, long, dark, and moving with purpose. Then it shifts slightly in the sunlight, and suddenly you realize it's not a shark, not a ray, but something else entirely. A fish that seems almost curious about you. A fish that doesn't just pass through your world, but pauses in it.

That's a Cobia. And if you've ever spent a spring along Florida's Gulf Coast especially in the Big Bend or Panhandle you know that their arrival means something. It means winter is over. It means the water is warming. It means it's time to start looking, scanning, watching. Because somewhere out there, just beyond the breakers or drifting across a grass flat, a cobia is on the move.

### THE FISH THAT MAKES YOU LOOK TWICE

Cobia are hard to describe until you've seen one up close. They're long and thick-bodied, with a broad, flattened head and a deep brown color that sometimes carries faint lighter stripes along the sides. In the water, they glide more than they swim, giving off a quiet confidence that sets them apart from other fish.

They can grow big really big. Fish over 50 pounds are common in the Gulf, and much larger ones are always possible. But it's not just their size that makes them memorable. It's their attitude. Cobia are curious. They'll follow a boat. They'll swim right up to structure. They'll trail behind a stingrays and sea turtles like they're part of the same animal. And when they decide to eat, they don't do it halfway.



That combination size, strength, and curiosity is what makes them one of the most exciting fish along the Gulf Coast. But what really defines cobia isn't just how they act. It's where they go.

Cobia are travelers. They don't belong to just one reef, one bay, or one stretch of coastline. Instead, they move seasonally, predictably, and sometimes surprisingly across hundreds of miles of the Gulf of Mexico.

In the winter, they hold in warmer waters to the south, around South Florida and the Keys. The water



there stays comfortable, the food is steady, and the fish conserve their energy. But, as the days get longer and the water temperature starts creeping upward, something changes and they start their journey north.

Along the Gulf Coast, the cobia run is one of those events you don't need a calendar for. The signs are all around you. The air softens. The wind shifts. The water turns that cleaner shade of green. And somewhere in that mix, the temperature hits that magic range somewhere in the high 60s to low 70s. That's when the first fish show up.

Not in huge numbers at first. Maybe just one or two. A single cobia cruising the beach. Another following a ray across a shallow flat. Enough to get people talking.

### THE BIG BEND: WHERE THEY SLOW DOWN

If you've ever fished Florida's Big Bend, you know it's different from the rest of the state. There are no long stretches of white sand beaches. No steep drop-offs just offshore. Instead, you get miles and miles of shallow water, broken up by grass flats, oyster bars, and winding channels. It's a place that feels quieter. More spread out. Less rushed. And for cobia, that matters.

As these fish move north in the spring, they don't just pass through the Big Bend they often linger. The water here warms quickly because it's so shallow, and the amount of natural food is hard to beat. Blue crabs, baitfish, and all kinds of forage live in those grass flats. So instead of racing along the coastline, cobia in the Big Bend tend to slow down. They spread out.

You might find one cruising a flat in Apalachee Bay, another hanging near a channel marker, and another shadowing a stingray in water so shallow you can see its back. Fishing here becomes less about chasing a fast-moving migration and more about understanding the water. You're scanning constantly—looking for movement, for shapes, for anything out of the ordinary. And when you finally spot one, it feels earned.

### THE PANHANDLE: WHERE EVERYTHING SPEEDS UP

If the Big Bend is where cobia slow down, the Panhandle is where everything shifts into high gear. Places like Pensacola, Destin, and Panama City are known for one thing when spring rolls around the run. Here, the migration feels concentrated. Focused. Urgent. Fish move along the beaches in clearer, more defined paths, often just a short distance from shore.

On calm days, you can see them from a boat tower, a pier, or even standing on the sand. That's what makes this stretch of coast so special. You're not just fishing, you're hunting. You climb up high, scan the water, and wait. And then suddenly, there it is: a long, dark shape gliding just beneath the surface. "Cobia" 2 o'clock!" From there, its game on! Everything happens fast after that. The cast. The retrieve. The moment the fish turns, and then chaos.





### FOLLOWING THE SIGNS

One of the most fascinating things about cobia is how often they don't travel alone. And they mate for life. When you see one, prepare to see another very close. If you really want to find them, you don't always look for the fish—you look for what they're following. Stingrays are the classic example. A big ray moving through shallow water will often have a cobia right behind it, waiting to snatch up anything the ray stirs from the bottom.

Sea turtles can attract them too. So can floating debris, buoys, or just about anything that breaks up the open water. It's like cobia are always looking for an advantage. Something to give them an easier shot at a meal. Once you start noticing these patterns, the water changes. It's no longer just open space—it's full of clues.

### WHAT DRIVES THE JOURNEY?

For all their personality, cobia don't move randomly. Their migration is tied to a few key things, and once you understand them, the whole pattern starts to make sense. Temperature is the big one. They follow warmth. As spring pushes north, so do they.

Food is another; where there's bait, there will be cobia. The Big Bend's grass flats and the Panhandle's bait-rich waters both provide plenty of opportunity. Spawning plays a role too. By late spring and early summer, many of these fish are moving into northern Gulf waters to reproduce, ensuring the next generation follows the same path.

Put it all together, and you get a migration that's as predictable as it is exciting.

### FISHING THE MOMENT

Catching cobia isn't always easy—but it's always memorable. Some days, they're aggressive. They'll charge a bait without hesitation, hitting with a kind of force that leaves no doubt.

Other days, they're picky. They'll follow, inspect, and turn away at the last second, leaving you second-guessing everything. That's simply part of the challenge.

Anglers use everything from live crabs and eels to jigs and artificial lures. In the Big Bend, a well-placed cast in shallow water can be the difference. In the Panhandle, timing and visibility matter just as much as lure choice. But no matter how you fish for them, one thing stays the same: When a cobia commits, you know it.

### THE FIGHT YOU DON'T FORGET

Hooking a cobia is just the beginning. They fight hard. Long runs, sudden turns, and just when you think they're done, they find another burst of energy. And then comes the boat-side pandemonium—the moment when a cobia sees you and decides it's not finished after all. It's part of their reputation. Plenty of stories start with, "We almost had him..." and end with a fish that made one last, wild surge. When you finally wear the Cobia down

you use a gaff to put it in the boat! The adrenaline sets in and no amount of words can express that feeling. That my friends is cobia fishing.

### MORE THAN JUST A SEASON

For many along the Gulf Coast, the cobia run isn't just about catching fish. It's a marker in time. It's the start of longer days on the water. The return of warm weather. The feeling that everything is waking back up again. In the Big Bend, it might mean quiet mornings poling across a flat, watching for shadows in the grass. In the Panhandle, it might mean climbing a tower at sunrise, scanning miles of water for that one unmistakable shape. Different places. Different styles. Same fish.



### LOOKING AHEAD

Cobia are strong, fast-growing fish, and they've supported a thriving fishery for years. But like any species that follows predictable patterns, they can be vulnerable. That's why regulations, size limits, bag limits, and seasonal rules—matter. They're not just restrictions; they're a way to make sure this migration continues. Because once you've seen a cobia in the wild—really seen it, you understand why it's worth protecting.

### THE ONE THAT STAYS WITH YOU

Ask anyone who's spent time chasing cobia, and they'll have a story. Not just about the biggest fish they caught, but the one they remember most. Maybe it was the first one they ever saw, cruising along a beach like it owned the place. Maybe it was the one that followed a ray right up to the boat. Or

maybe it was the one that got away after a perfect cast and a perfect bite. That's the thing about cobia. They don't just pass through these waters each spring, they leave something behind. A memory. A story. A reason to come back next year and start scanning the water all over again.

Because sooner or later, that shadow will appear again.

And when it does, you'll be ready. ▣

-Terri B. Huffmaster



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April brings excellent fishing to Tampa Bay. Anglers fishing from the Courtney Campbell Causeway to the Skyway Bridge will enjoy top inshore opportunities. Catch slot-sized Snook, target Mackerel feeding around rocky humps, and enjoy Redfish or Trout working the flats—plus an occasional Cobia.

Target areas with baitfish near rocky bottoms or mangroves, as predators follow their food source. Throughout the Summer in Tampa Bay, live Greenback Sardines are considered the most effective bait for targeting a wide range of fish species. Harvesting your own bait provides a sense of accomplishment leading to catches to bring home.

## ABOUT THE CAPTAIN

Captain Sergio Atanes has been fishing the waters of Tampa Bay since the age of five years old. He has seen all the changes over the last 50-years and loves to share his knowledge and experience with anyone interested in fishing especially kids which are the future anglers and captains. His goal is to educate and share the experience of fishing opportunities all over the Tampa Bay area.

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# APRIL ON THE GULF COAST

## New Seasons, Old Traditions & What's Ahead

by Captain Justin Searcy

**A**pril is one of those months that reminds you why we live and fish on Florida's beautiful Gulf Coast.

The long winter patterns start to fade, water temperatures stabilize, and everything from bait to game-fish begins to move with purpose. Out of Tarpon Springs and the surrounding waters, this is when things really start to come alive.

### SPRING PATTERNS ARE IN FULL SWING

As we transition into spring, the inshore fishery becomes more predictable and more exciting. Bait is the foundation this time of year. You'll start seeing larger schools of threadfins and whitebait pushing onto the flats and staging near the passes. When the bait shows up consistently, the fish aren't far behind.

Snook begin to stage closer to passes and along the beaches as they prepare for their summer spawn. Early in the month, you'll still find them laid up around mangroves and residential docks, espe-

cially during warmer afternoons. As the water continues to warm, their movements become more aggressive and more visible.

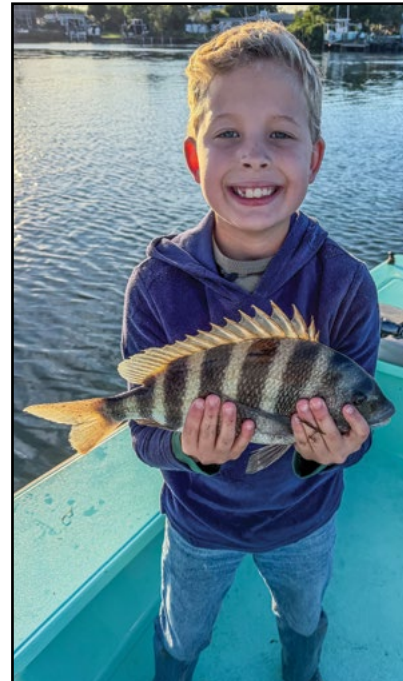
Speckled trout fishing is as good as it gets right now. Grass flats in that 3-6 foot range are producing steady action, especially on moving tides. Potholes, sand patches, and edges of the flats are key zones. It's a great time for both artificial and live bait anglers to stay busy.

Redfish are transitioning too. You'll find them cruising the flats, especially on higher tides, pushing into areas that were too shallow just a few weeks ago. Look for subtle signs, wakes, pushes, and nervous bait. This is classic sight-fishing season when conditions line up.

### DIALING IN YOUR APPROACH

This time of year rewards anglers who stay adaptable.

- *Live bait becomes increasingly effective as bait schools grow. Freelined pilchards or frisky pinfish with a cut tail can be hard to beat.*



- *Artificial lures still shine early in the mornings topwaters and soft plastics are especially productive for trout and redfish.*

- *Tides matter more than ever. Moving water is key. Focus your efforts around strong tide changes, especially near points, passes, and edges of flats.*

My friends @getbentlivebait is the go to for a convenient live bait stop. They have a location at the mouth of Anclote River right on the water. Pull up to their floating dock and get your live bait for the day without the mess or hassle of catching it yourself.

If you need more than bait, my other go to is Boat & Motor Superstores; they have it all, from rods to tackle and anything you need to be successful on the water. They have a great team who is always helping and willing to share tips and tricks that work - some of the pictures shown here are from my good buddy Kyle Kenyon who is always catching some impressive fish and is now showing his kids how to do the same.

And, as always, pay attention to water clarity. Spring winds can shift conditions quickly, especially on the Gulf side. Adjust your locations accordingly clean water almost always equals better fishing.



### A COMMUNITY ROOTED IN THE WATER

Fishing here has always been about more than just catching fish. It's about the traditions, the people, and the shared experiences that tie this community together. That's why I'm especially excited to share something meaningful for Tarpon Springs and the surrounding Gulf Coast area.

We are beginning bringing back a tournament that means a lot to many of us. With the help of the Rotary Club of Tarpon Springs we hope to make this tournament a success and fun event for all who attend.

### THE RETURN OF A TARPON SPRINGS TRADITION

After several years away, the Tarpon Springs Peter T. Assimack Memorial Tournament is coming back.

The last time this event was held was in 2019, and it left a lasting impression on everyone involved. In April of 2027, we're bringing it back bigger, better, and with the same purpose at its core.

This will be a Snook, Trout, and Redfish tournament, designed to highlight everything that makes our local fishery special. These species define inshore fishing on the Gulf Coast, and they offer the perfect format for both competitive anglers and those who simply love being on the water. But more importantly, this tournament is about honoring tradition, bringing people together, and continuing to build something that represents the best of our community.

Over the coming months, we'll be sharing more details like format, dates, entry information, and how to get involved. Whether you're a seasoned tournament angler or someone who just enjoys a good day fishing with friends and family, this is something you'll want to be a part of.

### LOOKING AHEAD

April is a month of momentum. The fishing is improving by the week, the weather is becoming more consistent, and the energy on the water is undeniable. It's a time to get out early, stay late, and take advantage of some of the best conditions we'll see all year.

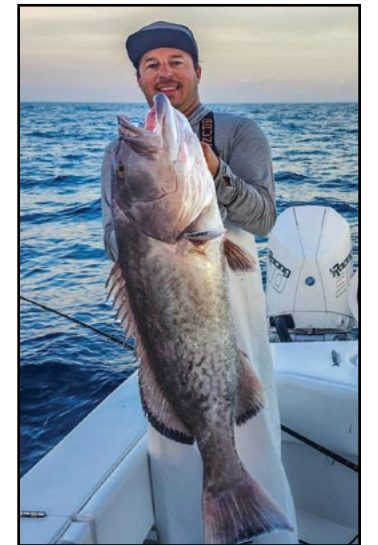
At the same time, it's also a reminder of how important it is to protect what we have - our fisheries, our waters, and the traditions that make this place special.

If you see me out there, don't hesitate to say hello. And as always, fish smart, respect the resource, and enjoy every moment on the water.

We've got a great season ahead and an even bigger future to look forward to. Follow me on social media and Instagram for more @capt\_justin\_searcy

Tight lines and see you on the water! 🎣

For more inshore fishing tips and updates, follow me on Instagram: @capt\_justin\_searcy.



## AFTER THE TRIP: BASIC BOAT CLEANING

by Captain Sean Signore

**S**o, you got up at 4 in the morning to make it to the ramp by 5 or 5:30 to ensure a better chance of finding bait, if that is what you like to do. Maybe you just show up whenever and throw some plastics or hard topwater baits around looking for fish. Either way, you got your boat in the water and most likely if you caught your own bait, you're going to have to clean the boat when you get back home because of all of the grass, shells and debris that fall out of the cast net. Washing all of that out with more saltwater is not good enough and you will quickly find out why if you neglect your boat and reels.

I like to start with washing down the rods and reels. Spray them down from the top. Avoid spraying water up inside the reels. It will lead to failure of the inside parts of the reel.

Sometimes, I wash the boat down at the ramp if they have fresh water available. Most of

the time I will just take it home so I can do it right. I will start with the trailer first by washing down the leaf springs, axles and wheels. Then I like to spray everything in the boat down with fresh water to help get the salt off and by everything, I mean the tower and console also. Water splash- es on everything if it is a choppy day out. You must take the time and get all the grass out of the crevasses and hatches. Do not forget to flush the motor for a few minutes. Then I will get a bucket with car wash or boat wash and scrub down the boat on the outside hull to get all the blood, mud and scum off. When the boat is close to being dry, I will apply hull cleaner to the sides to get back that clean white hull I love to see. A little bit of water left on the sides will help spread the hull cleaner around easier and you do not have to use so much of it.

After I wash down the outside of the boat to get the hull cleaner off, I will begin cleaning the floors and console with Clorox™ Toilet Bowl Cleaner with bleach. Again, I like it to be a little wet to help spread it around. I will apply an entire bottle to everything in open areas on the floor, the top of the gunnels and inside walls along with the console. Then a thorough wash down with fresh water makes it complete.



If you happen to notice your floors are not blindingly clean, Rust-Aid is a great way to get them there again. It will not hurt anything in the boat and your floors will turn white instantly. If you happen to have some rust coming from a screw or around your helm and seat or even a cleat on the gunnel that's oxidizing, you will be pleasantly surprised how well it will clean up and remove any stains fast.

As a captain it is important to me to have a clean boat when picking up clients and hearing a client say how clean the boat is makes it worth the effort.

If you would like to book a trip to go scalloping or a flats fishing charter, you can get in touch with me at 727-314-3474 or go to my website at [www.southernoutdoorsportsmen.com](http://www.southernoutdoorsportsmen.com)

As always, be safe and remember to be courteous to others while out on the water. 📌

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# SPRINGTIME GAGS OF TAMPA BAY

by Captain Sergio Atanes

**G**rouper aren't normally associated with fishing inside Tampa Bay; however, a small group of anglers have been able to master the art of catching legal size Gag Grouper and Red grouper in the shallower waters of the bay.

Some don't know that Tampa Bay is filled with small wrecks and artificial reefs, which is sponsored by Hillsborough County. Wrecks are marked on Coast Guard charts, while the artificial reef locations can be made available through the Environmental Protection Commission of Hillsborough County.

On a recent trip with some clients, we targeted a small wreck East of the ship channel, off of "F" cut in Tampa Bay. Yes, this wreck is shown on the chart! The story goes...it started taking on water sometime in the 50s, a barge loaded with cable. It was pushed off the ship channel before it sank. I snorkeled this wreck years ago and I could see the coils of wire still setting on its deck; around it were schools of Sheepshead, Mangrove Snappers and Grouper.

The technique to catching Gag Grouper is simple. First, find the wreck or reef. I prefer to use a software called "Fish Reveal" as its simple and fast to use and works every time.

This software



shows the contour of the bottom, wrecks and ledges like nothing I have ever used before. You can sit at home and mark your spots while not wasting time on your day of fishing. The best fishing times are about one hour before the change of tide or neap tide days.

Second, anchor uptide within casting distance of the wreck or reef.

Lastly, chum the gags and others away from their

home. Over the years I have tried using different types of chum (frozen and freeze dried). I found a product that seems to work well and it's fairly inexpensive to use called Pro Fish Chum, which comes in its own bag and is ready to use without refrigeration. The idea of chumming is to bring the fish to you and away from the wreck or reef. This technique increases your chances of landing your catch.

The preferred baits for catching Grouper are live Greenbacks or Pinfish, especially during Spring and early Fall. Dead cut Spanish Sardines tipped with a little bit of

Squid are tops in the winter months.



Tackle setup is about the same as with offshore fishing, except for lighter tackle. A Tampa Bay outfit consists of the following: a medium action Blackfin seven-foot spinning rod and Okuma Azores 50 spinning reel paired with 30-pound test Fins braided line. I prefer to use a one-ounce egg sinker (two-ounces if the tide is strong), a 30 inch-long 40-pound test mono leader (fluorocarbon is not needed) with a 4/0 circle hook. Jigs work great and I love to use them, but they can become pricey unless you can buy them in bulk.

Modern trolling motors with anchor locks make a big difference. My "Power Pole Move" Trolling Motor keeps me on the spot. No more guessing; just get over the spot and hit your Anchor Lock button and start fishing. I then take my bag of Pro Fish Chum and fill the water with fresh cut green back sardines, starting my chumming process. It takes several minutes before the chum slick



starts doing its magic, but as the Spadefish started coming to the surface, the Mangrove Snapper were darting in and out of the chum slick.

I grabbed a rod, baited it with a large sardine and made a cast just short of the edge of the wreck and handed it to my client. Within minutes, both our rods were bent, and we were hooked but also losing plenty of fish!

Even though the gags outfished us that day, we were able to catch several nice ones including two nice keeper Red Grouper. Although the season is closed for gags, the excitement was there. We also landed some nice Mangrove Snapper and some Spanish Mackerel, thanks to our surface lines.

In closing, please stay on top of regulations as far as size, bag limits and closed seasons. Tight lines! 🎣

**Captain Sergio Atanes is the host of Fishing Adventures Florida and Captain Sergio Fishing Chronicles on YouTube, Waypoint TV, Carbon TV, Outdoor Action TV and Angling TV. For info call 813-973-7132 or email: atanes@msn.com.**

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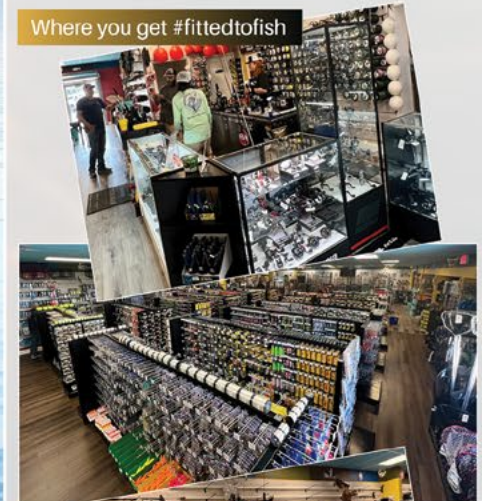
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