

Fish On!

For John Giannini, the grand opening of the new Gulf State Park Pier last July put the fishing world on the Alabama Gulf Coast back into alignment.





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The 43-year-old from Gulf Shores has been an avid pier fisherman since he was 11 years old. Although he has access to any kind of fishing available on the Alabama coast, his penchant for fishing the Gulf State Park Pier is as strong as it has ever been.

"I first started fishing the pier by myself two years before it blew down in 1979," Giannini recalled. "I fished it extensively from 1977 until it went down in Hurricane Frederic in October of '79. I fished it hard after it was built back after Frederic in 1981. I fished it very hard from 1981 until 1988 when I opened J&M Tackle."

While building a successful business with his brother, Michael, John fished as much as was feasible until Hurricane Ivan wiped out the old pier in 2004. The bigger and better new Gulf State Park Pier opened in July of 2009 and Giannini was one of the first to cast a line from the new structure.

"In 2009 I considered myself a very active member of the pier fishing community again," John said. "When I say community, it's being out there on a constant basis to where you develop friendships. It's a family of regulars is basically what it is. I'm very happy that I was able to get back and be able to fish the rail with people I haven't fished with in a long time. Also, it's making new friends or people I've heard about that I've never had the chance to fish with."

Giannini said a regular can be anybody who fishes the pier on a daily basis to somebody who fishes mainly on weekends. He said a good many regulars can only fish once a month because of where they live, but they're still a regular because they fish the pier on a consistent basis and become friends with the other pier anglers.

Fishing the Pier

Basically, there are two kinds of fishing on the pier, one for smaller shallow-water species and the larger offshore/nearshore species, Giannini said.

Redfish, flounder, whiting, drum, Spanish mackerel, pompano, ground mullet and ladyfish are many of the fish that fit the shallow category, and most people who do any bass fishing in Alabama will have the tackle necessary to catch those species. If you don't have any tackle, the pier has rental equipment available.

"Any type of medium to light spinning tackle spooled with 8- to 15-pound test or any kind of baitcasting reel with the same size line is all you'll need for those kinds of fish," Giannini said. "With the exception of Spanish mackerel and bluefish, the majority of the other fish will hit live shrimp or frozen shrimp. With flounder, the best bait is a bull minnow."

Giannini said the Carolina rig is the most common way to fish from the pier with a half-ounce slip lead with a split shot crimped 18 inches above the hook to keep the slip lead away from the hook and bait.

"Unless there are bluefish on the bottom, avoid wire leaders," he said. "They want the most natural presentation that you can give them. When water is clear the difference between using monofilament off your reel for your leader and a wire leader can make the difference in catching a lot of good fish and not catching anything at all."

"I witnessed it several times last year. Last fall and into the winter, we had some of the best whiting fishing ever. A lot of us out there were using that basic rig I was talking about and then somebody would come up with what I call a 'tourist rig,' a beaded rig with wire leaders. We'd be catching fish left and right. A person using the 'tourist rig' would be looking at us like, 'what am I doing wrong.' I try to tell



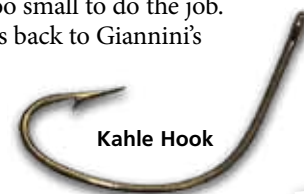
people to change their rigging to get stealthier. Sometimes they don't want to listen, but I tell them, 'trust me, if you will rig a Carolina rig without a wire leader, your success rate on the bottom fish will increase dramatically.'"

Giannini suggests using No. 4 or No. 2 Kahle hooks, which some people may consider too small to do the job. However, it goes back to Giannini's natural-presentation mantra.

"If you're using frozen shrimp, you're cutting them into pieces the size of the tip of your finger," he said. "You want to bury the hook inside the bait as much as you can. The stealthier the rig, the more success you're going to have."

For the smaller pelagic fish like Spanish mackerel and bluefish, which are surface feeders, Giannini suggests using mainly spoons and gotcha plug.

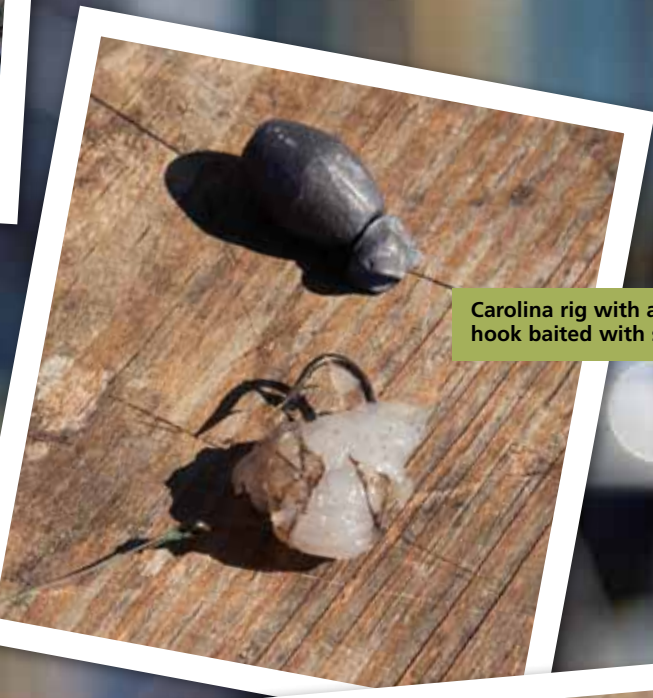
"Because those two fish have lots of teeth, you need a short section of wire leader and a plug or spoon," he said. "You cast and retrieve at fairly fast pace with a jiggling motion."



Kahle Hook

John Giannini and his son Hunter preparing rods for fishing off the pier at Gulf Shores State Park.

"If you're sight fishing, you're staying on the rail with a cobia jig, a 3- to 4-ounce jig that is specifically designed for cobia. You want a two-foot leader with 60- to 80-pound monofilament. You just sit on the rail hoping to see one come by. Some days fishing is good. Some days it's not."



Carolina rig with a Kahle hook baited with shrimp



Bucktail Jig

Gotcha Plug

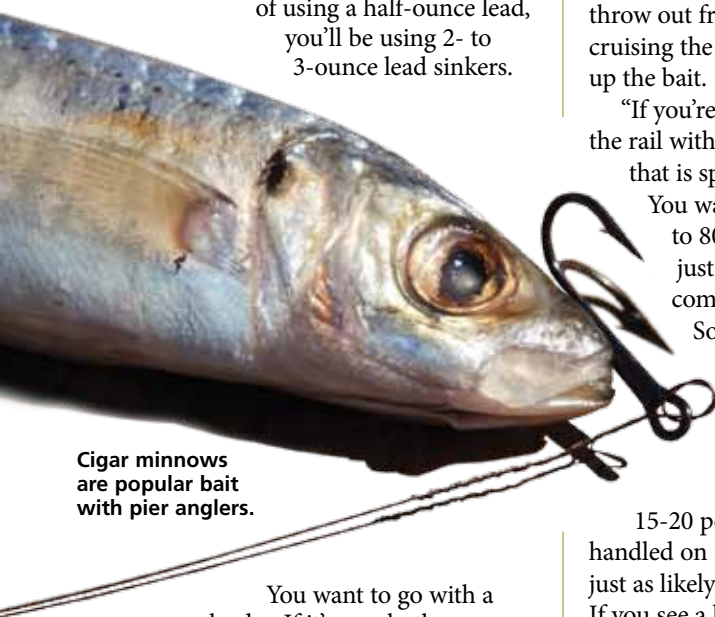
Diamond Jig

Fish On!

For those who want to catch some of the larger species, an upgrade in tackle is required. And when you're out near the end of the pier, you never know what you're going to hook. Two sailfish were hooked last year and numerous large tarpon have been spotted near the pier.

"Basically any rod and reel that's kind of like a surf rod is going to be needed to catch fish like bull reds and big black drum," Giannini said. "The reel needs to handle at least 200 yards of 15- to 20-pound test line. I prefer 300 yards, but if you have a reel with only 200 yards you should be OK.

"You're going to be using bait like frozen cigar minnows and frozen mullet and bottom fishing. You're going to need a much larger Carolina rig. Instead of using a half-ounce lead, you'll be using 2- to 3-ounce lead sinkers.



Cigar minnows are popular bait with pier anglers.

You want to go with a mono leader. If it's rough, the egg sinkers will tend to roll. You may have to go to a pyramid lead to anchor the bait better."

March is a transition month for pier fishing in the Gulf. Water temperature starts to rise and some of the first fish to show up will be Spanish mackerel and pompano, followed by whiting and sheepshead.

"Then everybody is waiting for the cobia to show up," Giannini said of the species also called ling and lemonfish. "They show up to the east on their migratory run and hopefully by the end of March and start of April the cobia will start cruising past the pier. That's the true sign that spring is officially here on the Gulf Coast. Cobia fishing is 100 percent determined by the weather. Everything needs to fall into place. It's best to have nice east winds to see the water temperature to get into mid 60s.

It's nice to have clear water and a lot of sunlight. They're hard enough to see in the first place, but the more sun you have to get them up in the water, it makes them a lot easier to see them and a heck of a lot easier to catch them."

Cobia Fishing

For cobia fishing, Giannini said two methods are employed – bottom fishing and sight fishing.

"If it's not the best water conditions, then people will put a bait out on the bottom," he said. "Your live bait should be starting to show up – pinfish, grunts. Sometimes you can throw out frozen bait. If they're cruising the bottom they might pick up the bait.

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Fishing for cobia requires the beefiest tackle needed for pier fishing, according to Giannini.

"Cobia can run anywhere from 15-20 pounds that can be easily be handled on 15- to 20-pound line. But you're just as likely to see a 50- to 60-pound fish. If you see a big fish like that come by, you'd better have good quality tackle. It's not so much big tackle, but a reel of good quality with a quality drag. It needs to be rated to hold at least 250 yards of 25-pound test. I would not go smaller than that for cobia. A cobia is not like a king mackerel where you get one fast run and they're out of energy. A cobia is a thick-tailed, strong, slow-running fish. He's like a locomotive. He can't go real fast, but he can go a long way pulling a lot of drag. They're one of the hardest fish to catch on the pier.

"The best chance to catch cobia is April to first part of May. During that time just about everything is biting – Spanish, bluefish, flounder, pompano. The only exception is king mackerel. Kings show up normally in the middle of May."

To catch some of the larger saltwater species, a heavier rod and reel is recommended.



King Fishing

Giannini said there is a considerable difference in king fishing between the old pier, which was toppled during Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and the new pier, which was opened to the public in July 2009. The old pier was about 800 feet long, while the new pier is the longest on the Gulf of Mexico at 1,540 feet.

"The end of the old pier was on top of a sandbar in 10- to 12-feet of water," he said. "The end of the new pier is in 28- to 30-feet of water. Last year we had some of the most fun catching kings than I have ever seen in my life from the day it opened until Ida (a rare November tropical storm) knocked part of the decking off. I fished out there just about every single good morning. If it was good fishing conditions, I tried to fish a few hours before I came to work. It was just incredible."

For king fishing, Giannini recommends spinning tackle with a reel that will hold 250 yards of 15-pound test line, although some people will go with lighter line for the added challenge.

"Personally, I think you're better off with a little larger line," he said. "But if I had a choice of 150 yards of 25-pound line or 250 yards of 15-pound line, I'd take the smaller line with more capacity. The first run of a king is usually going to be a fairly long run. You're only going to put a certain amount of drag on a king mackerel no matter what

size line you use. So you're better off with a little smaller line and having a lot of it."

Giannini said the rigging for kings is very simple to make. Start with a very strong No. 2 treble hook and a two-foot section of 25- to 30-pound test wire leader with a small swivel. The wire leader comes in two versions — multi-strand wire like Sevenstrand that must be crimped with a sleeve or a single-wire leader that can be twisted right onto the hook and swivel. The wire should be bronze color and avoid any wire with a plastic coating.

"For bait, alewives usually hang around the pier and you can catch them on bait rigs, but bait has been very scarce since the pier opened," he said. "Most people were using frozen cigar minnows. You let them thaw out and hook the minnows through the head and through the lower jaw. Then you're trying to take something that's not alive and make it look realistic. Cast out and free spool and let the bait sink for 5-10 seconds. You want the drag relatively loose. Use a slow jiggling motion. Then stop and open the bail. That's usually when that king will hit. You basically want him to have free spool when he hits. Give him a few seconds of line and flip the bail. Then it's 'Fish On!'"

"The thing is not to get discouraged. It takes a little time to get acclimated to king fishing. You can't just throw a bait and expect to catch a king. It takes good bait presentation."

Need Help? Just Ask

Giannini said the main suggestions for someone who is a newcomer to pier fishing are to pay attention to what the regulars are doing to catch fish and don't be afraid to ask questions.

"You'll find out real quick who is willing to help and who is not," he said. "Just about anybody out there is willing to help. Look at the way they hook their bait, the way they rig their leaders. The reason they're catching fish is they know what they're doing. There's always somebody out there willing to help. If somebody turns his nose up at you, go ask somebody else. It's that simple. The better that people get along, the more fish get caught and the fewer fish get lost."

"I volunteer information all the time; I tell them you need to change your leader,



King mackerel is one of many species caught off the pier.

you need to hook your bait a little different. That's just part of the experience."

Giannini said compared to fishing off the old pier, the new pier offers much more consistent good fishing. There is a four-rod per person limit on the new pier, but he considers that a wise move because some people were bringing out so much tackle that it interfered with the other pier anglers. He also marvels at the size of the new pier with 2,448 feet of fishing space along the rails and a huge octagon on the end.

"You could have a full-fledged game of basketball on the end of that thing," he said. "It's 90 feet across. The pier pretty much doubled in width on the walkway and almost doubled at the end. There is tons of room. And it almost doubled in length."

"We are so looking forward to this fishing season, it's not even funny. If it's anything like last year, it's going to be phenomenal."


Permits and Licenses Required

To fish the pier, a valid Alabama fishing license is required as well as a pier permit. The daily pier fishing permit is \$8 for adults and children 12 years and older. Children 11 and younger are admitted free with a paying adult. Passes are available for a week (\$40), month (\$80), six-month (\$160) and annual (\$320).

"That's the best \$8 anybody can spend to come out and have a great time," Giannini said. "A six-month pass or a yearly pass is one of the best presents you can get anybody. That's what I got Michael for Christmas. I got him the six-month pass. He thought it was cool. He said now he can go out and fish or just walk out there any time he wants. That's the great thing about a pass, you don't have to make sure the fish are biting, you can just walk out there any time you feel like it."

Giannini promotes the pier every chance he gets and he catches a little grief from some people who don't want the word out about how good the fishing is.

"I tell them the state didn't spend \$17 million for a few people to have a good place to fish," he said. "The pier has a large economic impact on the Alabama Gulf Coast."

"My son didn't get to fish the old pier. He's about to turn 12 and my daughter just turned 10. They had so much fun on the pier this year. I'm so happy to have place take my kids fishing without having to crank up a boat, without having to put much effort into it and know we're going to catch fish. I have a freezer full of flounder, redfish and whiting. I have paid for my pass." 

For More Information

Giannini suggests that anyone who wants to fish the pier go to www.emeraldcoastpierfishing.com for the latest information about piers along the northern Gulf Coast. "It's a great site and it has an Alabama link that's basically a forum for people fishing on piers," he said. "It's the most accurate, up-to-date way for people to know what's going on."

Visit www.outdooralabama.com to learn more about the Gulf State Park Pier and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.