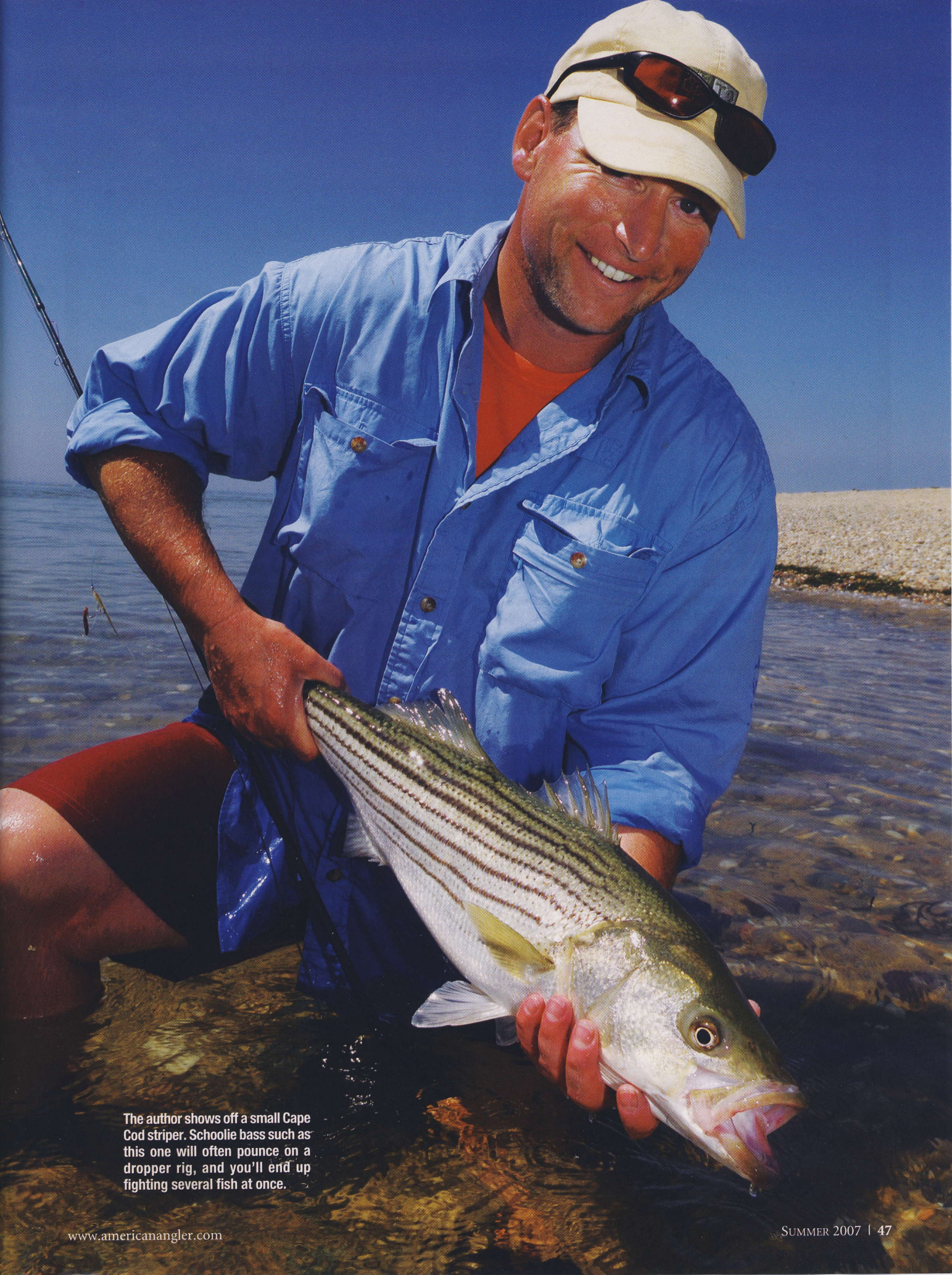


Saltwater

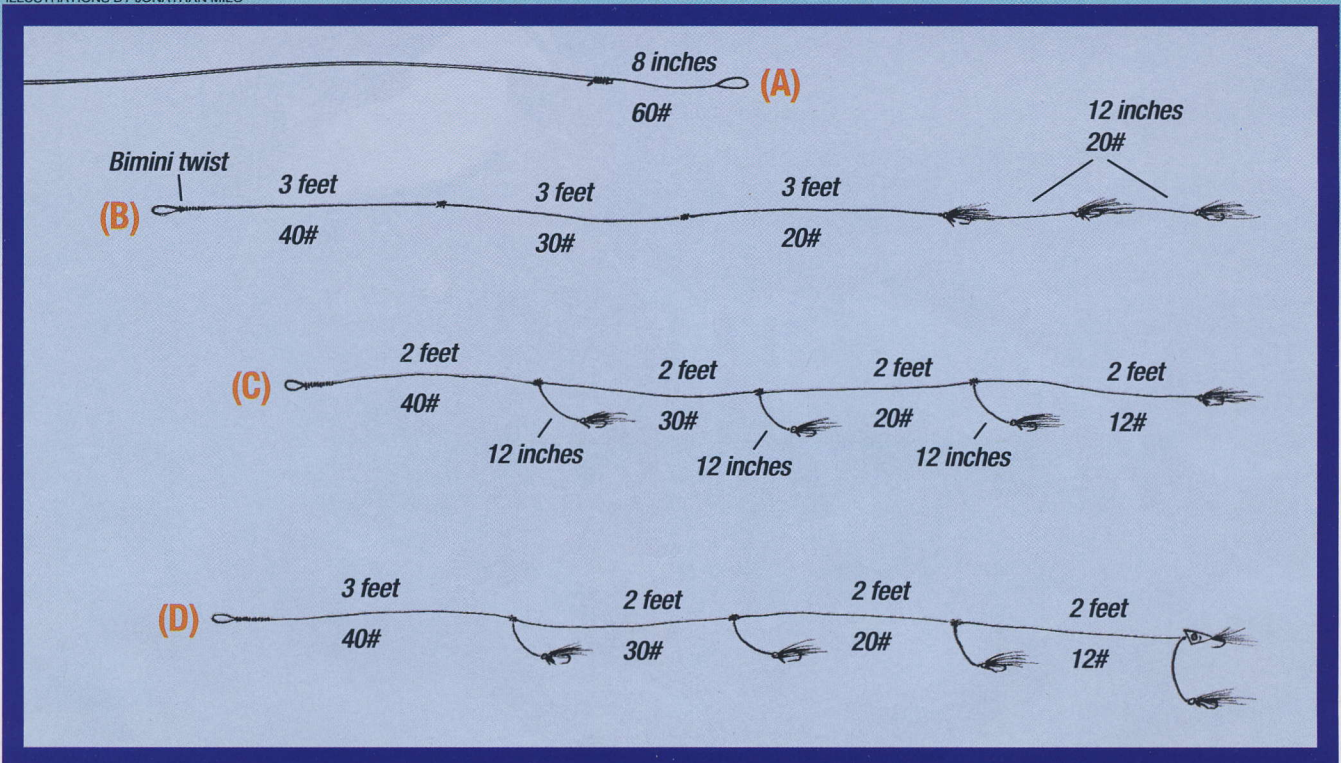
You use dropper rigs for trout all the time; why not try multi-fly setups in salt water, as well? You may be surprised by what you catch. BY TOM KEER

DR P ZONE

Over the past decade or so, dropper rigs have become ubiquitous on trout streams all over the country. For that reason, it has always surprised me that saltwater fly rodders rarely cast more than one fly at a time. The number of anglers who fish droppers for stripers, bluefish, and squeateague is so small that the group is often referred to as a cult. Fellow fly fishermen beware. The cadre of saltwater dropper fishermen is growing, and these anglers have discovered what trout bums have known all along: You can catch more fish with multiple-fly rigs.



The author shows off a small Cape Cod striper. Schoolie bass such as this one will often pounce on a dropper rig, and you'll end up fighting several fish at once.



There are three basic kinds of saltwater dropper rigs. All should start with 8 inches of 60-pound mono attached to the fly line and with a perfection loop at the end (A). The standard fly-to-fly leader (B) is nothing more than several patterns connected by clinch knots at the hook bends. A fly-to-knot leader (C) has flies attached to the tag ends of the leader knots and a single "point" fly at the end. A topwater-and-subsurface rig (D) features a popper on point, with a streamer on a dropper line tied directly to the eye of the popper. Other subsurface patterns can be attached to the tag ends of the leader knots for a hybrid rig.

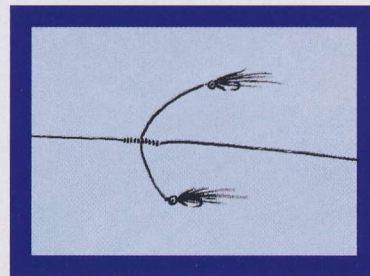
What's the Point(s)?

Compared with a trout stream, the ocean is a dynamic environment. Its complexities include migratory fish species and their unique behaviors, changing tides, lunar phases, and fish movement. Add a dozen types of bait in the water at all times, and it's easy to get overwhelmed by the problem of fly selection. Using a dropper rig will help you find which bait the fish want and then get on with the catching.

When you scan or seine the water for baitfish clues, you discover what is going on in the water for several feet around you. But it's tough to tell what's happening between you and where your fly lands, some 40 to 80 feet away. Sand eels, for instance, can be mixed with silversides, clam worms, shrimps, squids, menhaden, and herrings, among others. You can't really trust your eyes, either. While you may think a pod of striped bass is feeding on the silversides you see spraying out of the water, the bass may be gorging on drifting shrimps, and the silversides may simply be moving out of harm's way. If you throw a silverside pattern, an occasional aggressive bass or two may whack the fly, but your total catch numbers will be much lower than if you'd been casting a shrimp pattern.

The only way for you to find out what the fish really want is to get consistent strikes or hookups. Droppers improve your odds of putting the right pattern in front of a fish, and such a system allows you to run through a variety of patterns before the school splits. You gain an edge, as well as a deliberate style of fishing that quickly converts hunches into facts.

Even when you already know what kind of bait the fish are



If you want to fish two flies off the same knot, use a blood knot tied with very stiff monofilament, and make the droppers just six inches long to avoid tangling.

eating, droppers also answer the question of what patterns or styles of fly work best in a given situation. Every angler has experience with a "hot" fly, the specific pattern that outperforms any others—even those that imitate the same forage—on a given day. If you keep changing the flies on your dropper rig, you can run through size, silhouette, and color options faster, which helps you pinpoint what the fish want. Test out Flatwings and Deceiver-style flies, streamers and bucktails, or flies constructed of natural or synthetic materials. Vary topwater with subsurface patterns, attractors and imitators, or large flies with small. Let the fish decide.

Follows and short strikes are clues that you've just about got the right pattern. You've captured the fish's attention enough to make it follow or nip, but something minor keeps the fish from committing to your fly. Your fly is a bit too something: too bright, too dark, too much flash, not enough flash, a bit too big or a tad too small. Stay within that fly group, but change slightly until you get the fish to eat.

If the fish ignore all the patterns, first change your approach. If they still refuse, change one or two flies, and resume fishing.



The largest fly on your rig should be attached directly to the leader, as the “point” fly, in case you hook a good-size striper. The direct connection will give you all the power you need to fight the fish.

Keep changing patterns until you find one the fish like. Sometimes, one fly consistently gets all the attention. In this instance, add more of that pattern to your rig.

Knot-to-Fly Rigging

There are two easy ways to rig droppers: knot-to-fly and fly-to-fly. In the knot-to-fly rig, each fly swings independent of the others, for each one is connected directly to the leader via the tag end of a blood knot. In the fly-to-fly rig, you’re attaching the flies directly to each other in a series. The method you use should be determined by the effect you want to achieve.

The knot-to-fly method allows you to simultaneously drift several flies, each of which imitates a different kind of bait. The largest and longest fly should be tied on as the last fly—also known as the *point* fly—on your leader rig. The smaller, less wind-resistant flies are spread throughout your leader and are known as *droppers*.

A large point fly adds balance and movement to your leader.

Picking Patterns

When you’re choosing patterns to create a dropper rig, consider the various sizes and shapes of your flies. For subsurface work, you’ll have streamers, bucktails, epoxies, silicones, and weighted flies such as Clouser Deep Minnows. For surface flies you can choose poppers, sliders, Gurglers, Bangers, Crease Flies, or floating minnows. Think about their length and weight and how they affect your cast. Those details determine which rigging technique you use. If your rig consists of several differently weighted flies and seems like it’ll be prone to tangling, use a fly-to-fly system. If you are using light flies that fish best with a lot of action in the water, a knot-to-fly set up is more appropriate.

—T. K.

It’ll imitate larger bait, such as herrings, alewives, or menhaden. The direct connection between your leader and the point fly is important; if the large fly attracts a big fish, you’ll have plenty of strength to put him on the beach. The droppers are attached to the tag ends of each knot in your leader and should mimic smaller bait, such as silversides, sand eels, clamworms, and shrimps.

There are two ways to tie a knot-to-fly rig: using blood knots or five-turn surgeon’s knots. The blood knot forms a 90-degree angle between the leader and the fly, which keeps the fly from twisting around your leader during the cast. As you tie each leader knot, be sure to leave a 12-inch section of monofilament as a tag, and tie your fly to the tag with an improved clinch knot or a surgeon’s loop. Some anglers like to attach two flies to the same blood knot (one to each tag end), but this arrangement can cause tangles, so use a heavier and stiffer mono and a six-inch tag.

The five-turn surgeon’s knot has tag ends that are on a 45-degree angle to the leader. The surgeon’s is far easier to tie than the blood knot, particularly with heavier mono. While the standard surgeon’s knot calls for two turns, go to five for additional breaking strength. Attach your fly to the tag end that points toward the end of the leader, and you’ll get fewer break-offs. I like to use very stiff leader material—such as Maxima, Trilene XT, Stren Original, or Bass Pro’s Excel Trophy—because the stiffness maintains distance between the fly and the leader.

Fly-to-Fly Systems

A fly-to-fly rig can serve two purposes: You can easily create a school of baitfish, and you can employ a topwater-and-subsurface approach, in which you simultaneously fish a popper with a streamer (or several). Here, the topwater fly is the point fly, with the dropper tied directly to the eye of the point fly. This approach covers two different parts of the water column and creates a disturbance at the surface to attract fish, which often then eat the second food option. A fish that is attracted to the popper’s

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