

# Rainforest Roosters

ROOSTERFISH ARE PLENTIFUL ALONG COSTA RICA'S OSA PENINSULA, BUT THERE'S MUCH TO LEARN ABOUT THIS POWERFUL, REMARKABLE CREATURE  
BY [REDACTED]



*Anglers travel to Costa Rica to tangle with roosterfish just off the coast.*





Stout spinning gear stands up well to hard-charging roosters.

ADRIAN GRAY (2)



Reviving roosterfish before releasing them is critical.

The pounding of the surf grew louder every few seconds as rollers from the Pacific collided with the boulder-strewn shores of Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula. We bumped along slowly, trolling live sardines just outside of the surf zone. The salty, mist-filled air made my skin and sunglasses wet to the touch. The skies were dark with thick clouds that appeared nearly every afternoon during our trip to the Crocodile Bay lodge in the middle of the summer rainy season.

We were so close to shore that I half-expected to see a T-rex come roaring out of the vibrant, wild landscape. I had not been to southern Costa Rica in more than a decade, and I was happy to see the Osa hadn't changed much — the rainforest thick with dark green foliage that runs from the beach toward the tops of the cliffside. Truthfully, this area hasn't changed much in thousands of years: rich soil, a rainforest full of animals and sounds, the surf rolling in and unlimited fishing potential.

The Osa Peninsula is one of the most

biodiverse places on the planet, and one can only assume the same could be said for the waters off the coast. The deep bay, known as Golfo Dulce or the "sweet gulf," separates the peninsula from mainland Costa Rica. At the mouth of the bay is famed Matapalo Rock, a giant formation that rises out of the water and is plastered in bird droppings, looking as if it's been tagged by local street artists. The waves pour in, crash into the rock and shoot spray skyward, creating a dance of swell and stone. It's in these turbid waters that roosterfish are most at home.

We were fishing across the mouth of the gulf from Matapalo, on the southern side, and the dance was in full swing. There's no easy way to get ashore, and there are few homes along the coast, which made me wonder if anyone had ever tried fishing from the rocks. I was just about to ask our English-speaking mate about beach fishing when I felt a sharp tug at the end of my line. I jumped to my feet with my thumb on the spool of the Penn Fathom II lever-drag reel as line started ripping off.



“That’s him,” I said to no one in particular. I’d never caught a decent-size roosterfish, and I sure as hell didn’t want to make any mistakes. The speed of the line pouring off the reel increased fivefold. I counted to six before I slowly eased the drag lever to strike, and the circle hook took hold. The rod bent into a shape resembling the rind from a slice of watermelon as I leaned back and let out some sort of a cheer.

The fish made a powerful first run. Roosterfish, I’d been told, fight like a jack crevalle on performance enhancers. It’s an accurate description. I kept the drag light at just five or six pounds. I was in no rush and was not about to try and horse this freight train to the boat.

“That reel’s pretty smooth, huh?” said Jordan Jennings, who was invited by the folks at Pure Fishing, which had organized this press trip. I nodded. “It’s even smoother if you turn the clicker off,” he said with a laugh. I was so in the moment that I didn’t even realize I’d left the clicker on. Then again, I could listen to that song all day.

Using short pumps, I began to gain line, and after 15 minutes or so, we got our first glimpse of the fish’s tall dorsal comb and the dark stripes running down its flanks, which resemble an upside-down Nike swoosh. When the fish saw the boat, it hit the hyperdrive and took off for Panama. I laughed and hung on, but I didn’t want to prolong the fight too much. Roosterfish are a protected species in these waters, and they’re so powerful they can fight themselves to death.

I reeled the fish in close enough to see color three more times before it finally relented and came within range to grab the leader. The mate scooped the fish in a large net and brought it on board. I was overcome with joy, having caught such a unique fish in such a special place.

I slipped a gloved hand around the base of the fish’s tail and another under its belly to bring the 35-pounder up for a photo. The fish’s heart-beat felt like a rapid-fire drum line pounding in my hands. We took a few rounds of photos before releasing the fish. But before we let it go, there was one more thing to do: clip off about a half-inch of the fish’s dorsal comb. The little black clippings were placed into a vial of alcohol as samples in a genetic study spearheaded

by devoted angler Tom Olivo, the International Game Fish Association, Mexican researcher Sophia Ortega-Garcia, and marine biologist and genetics expert Jaime Alvarado-Bremer of Texas A&M University.

#### ‘Nobody Knows Anything About It’

While roosters are a popular gamefish, little is known about the species. They thrive in the shallow waters of the eastern Pacific, most notably in Central America and Mexico, but in general they aren’t fished commercially. Their meat is not desirable; I’ve heard it’s downright bad. That’s good for the fish, but it makes assessing the population difficult. Researchers use commercial catch data to determine the abundance of the species, but there’s only one known commercial fishery, a small fleet out of Ecuador.

Ortega-Garcia has been studying roosterfish for some time and has conducted studies and sampling in La Paz, Mexico, on the Baja Peninsula, hoping to learn more about their migration patterns and basic biology. But the study was very localized, and Olivo hoped to expand the research into Central America.

“What really attracted me to Costa Rica was targeting roosterfish,” says Olivo, a 65-year-old fly-fishing fanatic from Montana, who owned a company that specialized in measuring organizational and human performance. He sold his company a few years back and bought a home in Puerto Jiménez, the same area along the eastern coast of the Golfo Dulce that is home to Crocodile Bay lodge.

“I measure everything,” Olivo says. “I’ve caught 80 species out of Puerto Jiménez, but I’ve developed a deep respect for roosterfish because it’s hard to find another fish that combines power, speed and endurance like that fish does.”

Olivo had befriended the staff at the IGFA after submitting world records and swapping fish stories. His desire to learn more about the roosterfish that thrive in the rocks along the coast of the gulf led him to Dr. Bruce Pohlot, the IGFA’s conservation director. “I reached out and said, ‘We really need to study this fish. It’s really important to the economy here. It’s not threatened, but nobody knows anything about it.’”

With their punk-rock mohawk and love of tropical waters, it’s no wonder anglers are intrigued by roosterfish. And the IGFA is always



*The roosterfish fights like a jack crevalle on performance enhancers.*

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*A new study hopes to determine if this school of roosters off Baja mixes with the population in Central America.*

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looking to learn more about fish that generate a lot of interest but aren't the target of a lot of research, making the roosterfish an ideal candidate for a program. Choosing the best plan of study, however, was a bit problematic. Satellite tagging, which provides information on where fish roam and the depths they swim to, is very expensive. So Pohlot thought about genetics. Gathering fin clippings would help researchers learn if the fish caught in Costa Rica are from the same stock as those hooked along the beaches in Baja. And it'd be a heap cheaper — a genetic study costs about \$20 per fish, while each satellite tag runs upward of \$4,000.

"We don't think these fish travel very far, but we really don't know," Pohlot says. "So we said let's go in and span the coast from Mexico to Central America and take samples to see how connected the population is. We'll get a better idea of how much these fish move to mix with other fish."

To obtain the samples, the IGFA would tap its network of anglers and guides and ask them to clip off a small piece of dorsal comb from each fish they caught, noting the date, location and fork length. To minimize the fish's time out of the water, that is all the information that'll be collected during the first phase of the study.

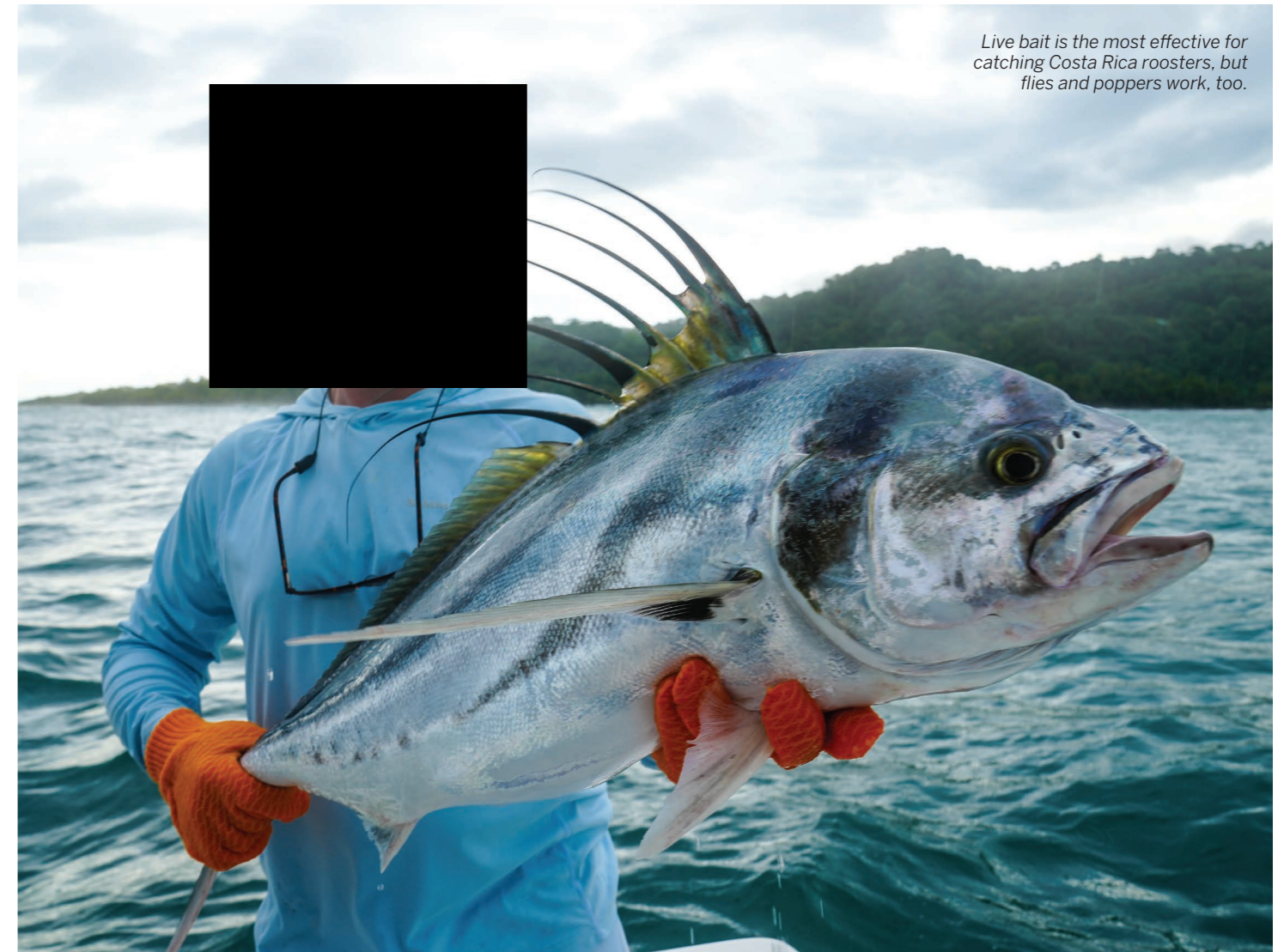
The catching and sampling was no issue, but the test kits sent to Costa Rica got hung up in customs because of the alcohol in the vials that protects the clippings. After a delay of several weeks, they decided to sneak the kits into the country. The program picked up steam, and the team hopes to obtain 30 samples from each of three locations: Mexico, Costa Rica and Guatemala. The genetics team at Texas A&M will analyze the clippings. In the second phase, they hope to gather more samples from the initial three locations and a fourth destination, such as Panama or Ecuador. The genetic information should reveal whether there is one population of roosters over the entire range, or multiple groups.

"This study will let us know if the fish cross different management boundaries," Pohlot says. "That information will let us know if they should be managed as an entire stock for the Pacific or by individual countries. That's going to be important moving forward."

From there, the study may expand to include more data. "I'm hoping that this can turn into something different down the road on a grander scale for conservation," Pohlot says.

### An Alluring Puzzle

It's difficult to pinpoint the best time of year to target roosterfish off the Osa Peninsula, according to Olivo, because he's seen good fishing every month he's been there. I fished in late June, in the middle of the shoulder season that runs from May through July, when daily



Live bait is the most effective for catching Costa Rica roosters, but flies and poppers work, too.

rainstorms cause runoff from the rivers and waterfalls that dump into the gulf, impacting water clarity. We caught roosterfish each day, but the top boat landed only three in a single outing. What we lacked in quantity, we made up for in quality. The majority of the fish we caught were a respectable 25 pounds and up. I threw poppers at the rocks using a new Penn Authority spinning outfit for hours without so much as a sniff. Slow-trolling bait was the preferred method. We didn't even attempt the fly.

Fishing these waters, Olivo has learned that just about every depth change on the chart can hold roosterfish or the snarl-toothed cubera snapper, creating a massive puzzle that's influenced by tide, current and bait abundance. "My whole understanding of where to target these fish has changed," he says. "As you head south toward Panama, there are several spots where the rivers come out of the mountains and create this mixing zone at certain times

of year and at certain tides. We were catching 40-pound cubera snapper and giant corvina in 6 feet of water right in the surf. You slide the boat in, pitch a bait and bring the boat out to avoid the swells and just let the bait marinate. I couldn't believe cubera would be in that froth as consistently as they were."

Many of the Crocodile Bay boats head to Matapalo Rock daily because it's a consistent rooster producer, which is a good thing when you have paying clients aboard. But Olivo has found that local roosterfish move around quite a bit. He and his guide, Capt. Corey Craig, have found a couple of spots that tend to hold juvenile roosters to 10 pounds. They're smaller, but the hook-up rate is much higher. He plans to try more fly-fishing in those areas. Other spots hold bigger fish but with less opportunities. In those areas, they'll switch it up and fish baits, hoping to catch a brawler in the 70-pound class.

"We don't get many sight-fishing opportunities," Olivo says. "I have to think that it wouldn't be much different than Baja, where they fish from shore, but it's impossible to get to these beaches. So we seek to find the right type of bottom, but the tide swings here are so great that it makes it more difficult."

A level of difficulty only adds to the allure of catching roosterfish on the edge of the rainforest. Learning more about the species through genetics may lift the curtain on a bigger picture of the species as a whole, but nothing quite compares to time on the water, learning the bottom structure and tides. That's what makes me want to go back and collect some more samples, in the name of science. 🐟

To learn more about the study, visit [IGFA.org](http://IGFA.org). For information about Crocodile Bay and the new Botanika Resort, visit [crocodilebay.com](http://crocodilebay.com).

An ice-cold Imperial tastes best after a good day of fishing.

