

BIG ROOSTER: This big roosterfish caught by Raleigh Werking (right) was released. It fell just short of the 16-pound-test world record.



ROOSTERS on the ROCKS

Target Panama's trophy roosterfish
for extreme light-tackle fun.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JOHN BROWNLEE

Two nervous live baits

swam behind the 31 Bertram, only yards from the jagged rocks of the Panamanian shoreline. Our captain had experimented with different bait species, settling on a small bonito and a goggle-eye on the surface, with another small bonito rigged and sent deep on a downrigger. The visible baits sensed trouble — and it didn't take long for it to show up.

The baits began darting frantically from side to side, unable to go far because they remained fastened to a stout leader and a 10/0 circle hook. Suddenly, a comb-shaped fin appeared amid a large boil as a roosterfish rose to the surface and engulfed the bonito. The fish disappeared with its prize as line ran from a free-spoiled reel, and after a few seconds of drop-back, Raleigh Werking threw the reel into gear and wound tight to the fish.



A FISHING PARADISE: Many people believe no other country can match the fishing found in Panama. Lengthy coastlines on both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean yield opportunity and beautiful scenery.

FACT: Roosterfish travel long distances. A satellite-tagged roosterfish traveled over 800 miles.

The rod bent as the fish came tight, and the roosterfish sounded, taking quite a bit of line with it. “Big fish,” said the captain in English we all understood. Werking, an expert light-tackle angler, had the fish on 16-pound-test and pumped and wound smoothly while making minute adjustments to the drag. It took some time — roosterfish are extremely strong fighters — but as the fish eventually tired, Werking applied increasing drag until the fish finally broke the surface after a 45-minute fight.

We pulled the big rooster aboard for a few photos and then released it, taking our time to make sure it was fully revived before letting it go and watching it disappear back into the green water whence it came. Werking smiled widely and said, “That was a nice one, about 60 pounds, but it’s not the one we’re looking for. Let’s go get a bigger one.”

Developing a Fishery

WERKING AND I WERE FISHING OUT OF TROPIC STAR LODGE, located in Piñas Bay, Panama, and we had run to the southeast that morning, to a large rock near where Panama ends and Colombia begins. Werking is the marketing director of Tropic Star and has spent a lot of time fishing the rocks of coastal Panama for roosterfish and the numerous other species found close to shore. He has caught many big roosters along the way, including the current 8-pound-test IGFA world-record fish, 54 pounds, 9 ounces. He was trying to break the 16-pound record of 71 pounds, 1 ounce, but the fish he had just caught wasn’t quite big enough.

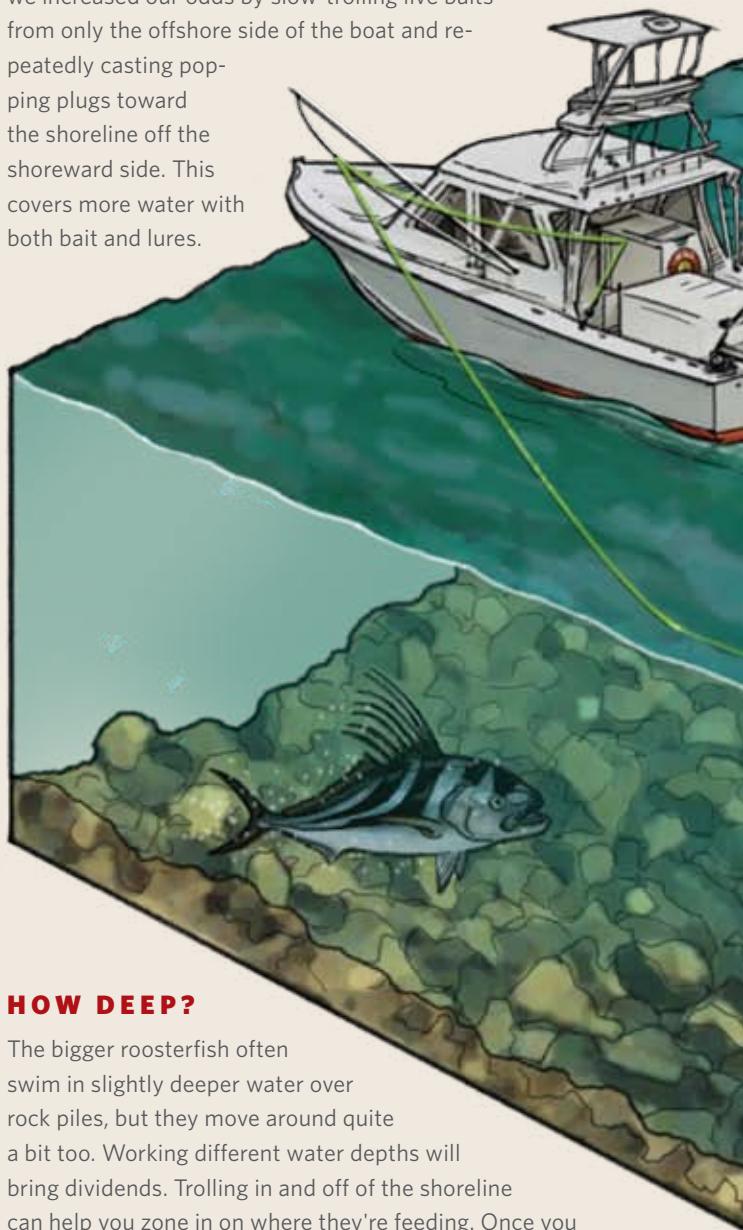
Between bites, I got a chance to ask Werking about the incredible inshore fishing around Piñas Bay. “My first trip to Tropic Star, in 1981, was an eye-opener,” Werking said. “While most people who come to Piñas Bay target black marlin offshore, the roosterfish really caught my attention as well. Over the years, I would find myself fishing more along the shoreline for roosterfish and cubera snapper. Back in the ’80s, it was all slow trolling with diving red-and-white Rapala plugs and Panama strip baits on the surface, close to shore. This method was productive for catching fish in the 20- to 40-pound range, which was great.”

But Werking wanted bigger fish. “When lodge owner Mike Andrews devised a new live-bait system, it really changed the game,” Werking said. “Now we could fish inshore armed with a full range of live baits, including bonito kept fresh in the tuna tubes while goggle-eyes and other smaller baits were kept ready for action in the circular center part of the livewell system. Having the ability to load up with such a variety of baits enabled us to spend more time fishing and less time trying to catch bait.”

Andrews’ livewell system, incorporated into all of the lodge’s 31 Bertrams, features six tuna tubes arranged around a conventional circulating center well, making it a snap to keep a wide variety of frisky baits ready to go. Each morning, we would find smaller baits, caught by crew members who went in search of goggle-eyes

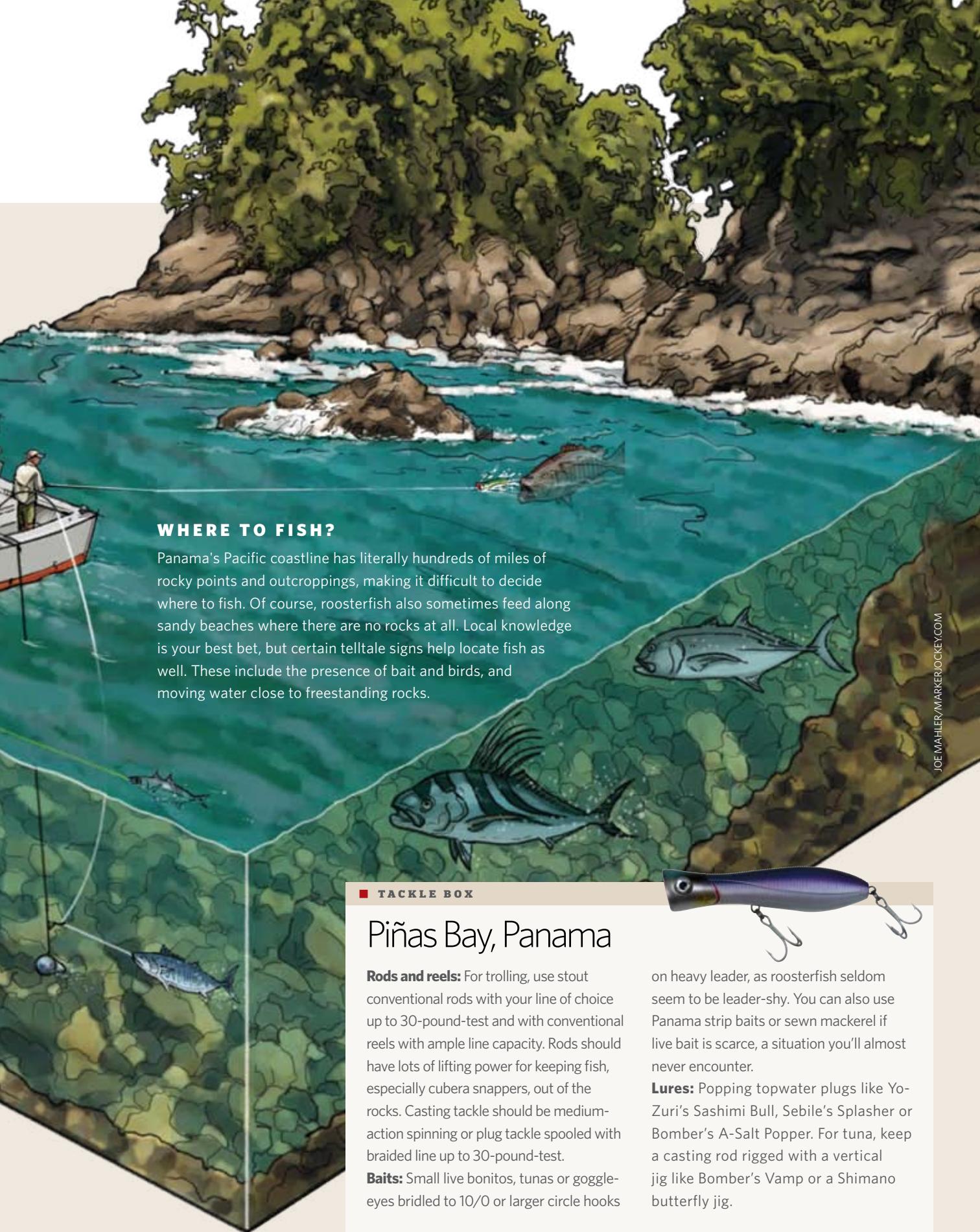
MAXIMIZE OPPORTUNITIES

Setting up the boat correctly helps maximize your shots at fish. You can always troll live baits from both sides, but we increased our odds by slow-trolling live baits from only the offshore side of the boat and repeatedly casting popping plugs toward the shoreline off the shoreward side. This covers more water with both bait and lures.



HOW DEEP?

The bigger roosterfish often swim in slightly deeper water over rock piles, but they move around quite a bit too. Working different water depths will bring dividends. Trolling in and off of the shoreline can help you zone in on where they’re feeding. Once you get a strike, work the area for awhile, as there may be more fish around. In addition, bonus species like big jacks, cubera snappers, trevallies and African pompanos inhabit the same areas. If a pod of bait has attracted a school of feeding roosterfish, chances are other species are bound to be close by too.



JOE MAHLER/MARKERJOCKEY.COM

WHERE TO FISH?

Panama's Pacific coastline has literally hundreds of miles of rocky points and outcroppings, making it difficult to decide where to fish. Of course, roosterfish also sometimes feed along sandy beaches where there are no rocks at all. Local knowledge is your best bet, but certain telltale signs help locate fish as well. These include the presence of bait and birds, and moving water close to freestanding rocks.

■ TACKLE BOX

Piñas Bay, Panama

Rods and reels: For trolling, use stout conventional rods with your line of choice up to 30-pound-test and with conventional reels with ample line capacity. Rods should have lots of lifting power for keeping fish, especially cubera snappers, out of the rocks. Casting tackle should be medium-action spinning or plug tackle spooled with braided line up to 30-pound-test.

Baits: Small live bonitos, tunas or goggle-eyes bridled to 10/0 or larger circle hooks



on heavy leader, as roosterfish seldom seem to be leader-shy. You can also use Panama strip baits or sewn mackerel if live bait is scarce, a situation you'll almost never encounter.

Lures: Popping topwater plugs like Yo-Zuri's Sashimi Bull, Sebile's Splasher or Bomber's A-Salt Popper. For tuna, keep a casting rod rigged with a vertical jig like Bomber's Vamp or a Shimano butterfly jig.

SPECIES GALORE: Look for (left to right) roosterfish, African pompano and cubera, among others.



TIP: "Rocky areas in deeper water can be very productive and can hold the bigger fish."

the night before, in the center part of the well, and we would run to the edge of the reef looking for small tunas to fill the tuna tubes. It never took long to find them after we deployed heavy bait rods rigged with small feathers and silver spoons.

In fact, on most days, we never had to go to the reef at all, since large schools of bonito had come in close to shore and would pop up in feeding frenzies throughout the day. We caught them easily by putting out the bait rods and also by casting into them with feathers and vertical jigs.

A Record Falls

"WHILE PURSUING THE IGFA WORLD-RECORD ROOSTERFISH on 8-pound-test, which stood at around 42 pounds, we were using goggle-eyes for bait," Werking said. "I like to put two identical baits out on the surface when fishing 8-pound line and drop a 3- to 4-pound live bonito on a downrigger using 16-pound line, looking for a 70-pound-plus fish. We got a bite on a goggle-eye close to the rocks, which immediately turned into quite a dance. In this case, the fish was really hugging the shoreline, going for the rocks. Fortunately, I was able to get the fish out into the open water by pulling at different angles. After a 45-minute battle, which included pushing the drag to over 50 percent at times, the fish came to the leader and weighed 54 pounds, 9 ounces. Catching a world-record roosterfish was a dream come true for me."

Panama's coastline around Piñas Bay features literally hundreds of likely-looking places where roosterfish might be found. Large freestanding rock formations jut upward from the ocean floor just offshore, and the shoreline itself has

countless rocky promontories where surf breaks and baitfish might be trapped in the roil, attracting predators like roosterfish and cuberas. But not every likely-looking place holds fish, and that's where local knowledge becomes invaluable.

"Roosterfish can travel long distances in their feeding trek," Werking said. "I was surprised to learn that a satellite-tagged roosterfish traveled over 800 miles. As with many fish, it's all about the food chain and their ability to harvest their prey."

■ SWS PLANNER

Piñas Bay, Panama

TROPIC STAR LODGE provides a perfect base of operations for a wide variety of fishing options. You can fish the rocks for roosterfish and other species; head just offshore for sailfish, blue and black marlin, and dorado; or split up your day and do both. And during one of our trips to TSL, we found yellowfin tuna and sailfish very close to shore, where the roosterfish live.

Someone even had a shot at a black marlin close by the rocks too! You never know what you'll find in this tropical fishing paradise.

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The big roosterfish prefer the bigger baits, but that's not to say you can't catch them on smaller baits like goggle-eyes. Rocky areas in deeper water can be very productive and can hold the bigger fish."

Local Knowledge

THE TSL CAPTAINS know the best places, spots which have produced trophy roosterfish consistently over the years, and there are lots to choose from. We worked a great many of them during two different trips to the lodge and caught an incredible variety of species, in addition to many roosters of all sizes.

In addition to the live baits, we also cast topwater plugs at the shoreline almost constantly, providing us with the best of both worlds — the chance to catch a monster roosterfish on a live bait and the chance to catch smaller fish and other species on the plugs with lighter tackle. This system worked very well; we put all three live baits on one side of the boat, leaving the shoreward side open for one of us to cast from the cockpit. The other would climb up to the bow of the Bertram and cast toward shore from there.

With three live baits and two popping plugs at work almost constantly, the bites came in rapid succession, and by the end

of the day, both Werking and I knew we had put in a full day of fishing. It's hard work, but work that pays great dividends. Over the course of our fishing trips, we caught cubera snapper, yellowfin tuna, bluefin trevally, Pacific sierra mackerel, African pompano and other jacks, in addition to the roosterfish.

Now Werking has his sights set on that 16-pound record. "I spend a lot of time trying to eclipse the current 16-pound world record," he said. "For this, I try to use only live bonito in the 3- to 4-pound range, one on the downrigger and one on the surface slow-trolling. This method has landed me numerous fish in the 60-pound-plus range, but I'm still looking for the right one."

Werking has had several huge fish on that would have broken the record, but they got away. "That's fishing," he said. We caught a number of roosterfish between 20 and 40 pounds during our trips, all great fun, especially on the plug tackle. All were photographed and released, and we resumed the hunt for the monster rooster.

The TSL record roosterfish tipped the scales at 96 pounds, so Werking's big fish is out there somewhere. In the meantime, it's sure a lot of fun catching and releasing all of those 40-pounders too. And who knows? You could be the first one to catch that elusive 100-pounder at Tropic Star Lodge. ~