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Roosterfish (*pez gallo*) will “flash the fin” when chasing down prey on the surface.

## ROOSTERFISH (*NEMATISTIUS PECTORALIS*)



Photo by Phil Zerofski

**T**he roosterfish (*Nematistius pectoralis*) is an important coastal pelagic of the eastern tropical Pacific, supporting valuable recreational fisheries throughout its range. Their range extends from Peru to Baja California,

both within the Sea of Cortez and north to Bahia Tortugas on the Pacific coast.

Reported to reach sizes of over five feet in length, the current all-tackle record stands at 114 pounds for a fish landed near La Paz in 1960. As the only member of its family (*Nematistiidae*), the roosterfish is characterized by a distinct comb formed by seven elongated dorsal fin rays, the first of which is nearly half the length of its body. Active predators, roosterfish are often identifiable when this dorsal comb breaks the surface while the fish pursues its prey.

Smaller roosters often hunt in packs that aggressively crash bait schools just off the beach. This behavior, coupled with their strength and endurance, attracts shore-based surfcasters and fly-fishers from all parts of the world. As with many tropical species, roosterfish become exceedingly aggressive as water temperatures near the low 80s, likely a response to the increased metabolic rates associated with warm temperatures. Large roosterfish are opportunistic feeders that will prey on a wide assortment of species, ranging from mullet and jacks to small snappers and sardines.

Typically considered of poor food

value, there are no directed commercial fisheries that target roosterfish; however, roosters, like other coastal pelagics, are particularly susceptible to inshore gill-net operations, and roosterfish are also primary targets of inshore recreational anglers along the entire range. Fortunately, most sport-caught individuals are released to fight another day after their capture.

Despite its popularity among the angling community, very little is known of the life history of this relatively unstudied species. Information on its growth rates, population dynamics, movement patterns, and reproductive biology is limited. Spawning locations also are poorly understood, though larvae have been sampled in the lower Gulf of California, indicating that Baja's East Cape may be a valuable spawning region for this species.

PIER researchers have ongoing acoustic tracking research investigating the fine-scale movement patterns, habitat utilization, and post-release survival rates of roosterfish. Findings to date suggest that even small individuals move along broad stretches (20 nautical miles) of coastline throughout the day and

night, encompassing a relatively large home range.

Although commonly targeted along sandy beaches, the tracking studies have shown that roosterfish have an assortment of movement patterns which are likely dependent upon prey abundance and availability. Among the larger individuals studied, it appears that deeper rocks and hard-bottom substrate may play a significant role in their daily movements. Initial findings suggest that post-release survival rates are relatively high, with little mortality in post-release individuals that were hooked in the mouth and handled properly.

Considering the high value of this predominantly catch-and-release fishery, the use of circle hooks is recommended to minimize hooking mortality.

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