

A Great Big Fish Story, Again!

(by William Ihne)

This second great big fish story I've written is hopefully the last, as I vow to never ever catch nor kill a really big fish again. This rule was followed for nearly a decade, until it was temporarily suspended, surprisingly so, as this story illustrates.

The gigantic fish that inspired the first "*Great Big Fish Story*" collided with my life early one morning, as I set out on my kayak with the goal to hook a mega-huge and toothy, monstrosously scary ling cod off the Northern California Coast. Shortly after entering the water, I hooked one. A battle ensued, stripping out line three times. The enormous fish finally conceded, making its final ascent to an unknown world, one littered with a history of uncharitable receptions for great big fish.

I clubbed it till it had been killed. With the

magnificent fish resting dead, barely in the net, placed upon the kayak, I sat alone, bobbing in Pacific swells, wondering why I had done that? Solely for ego, was the answer. I didn't need the meat. Most was eaten by others. Though, I did accomplish what I set out to do; I had caught my great big fish as I had wished, but was left feeling empty. An awesome fish, an important breeder, died a needless death. I sold my kayak, and never fished there again.

So push ahead eight years later, when, after retiring from fishing, and having begun a journey to observe and document living Baja coral reef fish, using pocket digital cameras, I get an invitation to go fishing that I cannot pass up; a trip that would inspire another *"Great Big Fish Story."*

It was a phone call from a cousin that set the wheels in motion for a fishing adventure. During the call, he explained a fishing dream he's held for a while. He wanted to fly to Baja to finally realize it. So I agreed to book a fishing guide and accompany him.

My earliest memory of this cousin, Easter 1966, we were five and six, he, a year older, quickly found all the easter eggs while I pouted. Five-years down the line, his car and monster models were impeccable, mine had paint smudged where too much glue had melted the plastic; they were atrocious. Yet, there was never a true rivalry between us, perhaps because I had no hope of winning. Now in our sixties, none of that mattered, only a fishing trip to fulfill a dream mattered; only that.

His dream, to catch a huge Roosterfish from the beach using a fly rod and reel. Soon after the call, he booked a flight to La Paz, in Southern Baja, Mexico.

It was a beautiful day in May, some years back, when my cousin's flight landed in La Paz. He called the night before to ask how he'd find me at the airport. "It's a small airport," I assured him. "Only one arrival gate, and a small crowd of twenty-five waiting." We drove his rental car south to El Sargento on the eastern, Sea of Cortez side

of the Baja Peninsula.

I'm no fishing guide; know nothing about Roosterfish, except hooked one on a fishing trip to La Ventana in 2005. It was no picnic, more a battle with a 200-pound angry rock. Too much rocking the pole up, reeling it down, rocking and reeling, over and over again. Line kept peeling away. I kept reeling. It took forever. I was miserable. The young Mexican guide asked to feed it to his dogs; not considered human cuisine apparently, according to him.

To support my cousin's fishing dream, I book a fishing guide, a three-generation fishing Captain named Humberto Cosio Lucero, to drop us on a sandy point on Cerralvo Island, an 18-mile long oceanic island with a peak of 2,100 feet elevation. Nothing on it but cactus, snakes, lizards, and a herd of feral goats.

Humberto met us before dawn. We loaded the boat and headed to the island on his 26-foot awning covered panga with 120hp

Honda motor. As the sun began to crest from behind Isla Cerralvo, the dolphins caught up with us, darting about, surfing the wake, leaping high in the air. The water cast from their soaring bodies glimmered like glittery jewels in the new morning sunlight.

After a 25-minute glassy glide of a ride, Humberto steered the craft onto a white sandy beach, we jumped out, unloaded our gear. Back to sea the boat went, leaving us behind.

My cousin kneeled to start setting up the fly rods, long ones with big reels. A class of fly rod I hadn't ever seen. I never asked their cost, but likely enough to warrant insurance coverage.

He threaded the fly line through the pole loops, attached a leader and then a fly using a fisherman's knot. The fly was simply a hook covered with dull, off-white soft bristles- like from an old man's hair brush. I responded to its construction, "I know of no woman that would wear these as earrings.

Aren't flies suppose to have a little sparkle to them?" He replied, "no, these are good," and handed me the pole and fly.

Once upon a time, I owned a fly rod, my cousin knew this, therefore, no need for casting tips. With rod in one hand, fly and line in the other, I walked along the sandy shoreline toward the point; the most likely spot to hook something; anything. This is my regret. I should have sent my cousin to the point before me.

Believe me, I didn't hurry to the point to catch a great big fish. I thought it to be the most sensible spot to cast from. Big fish were not on my mind, honestly, and there's no proof that I cared about hooking one. Ever since I caught the giant ling, that desire had been extinguished or so I thought; so I claimed. Sure, I hoped my cousin's dream would get realized, but at that moment, being outside in nature, well, that, and trying to remember how to use a fly rod is all that was on my mind.

It was such a delight to be back on Cerralvo; a deserted desert island, a quiet and enchantingly empty place with no signs of civilization, and to be there with a cousin who was now walking briskly to catch up with me, there wasn't a place I'd rather be. With mild weather and blue sky abounding, it was time to try out the fly rod.

As I reached the point, I quickly slipped into a fisherman's stance, pulled out some fly line from the reel and began whipping the rod or whatever you call it? "Fly Casting!" That's it. It didn't take long to remember how. I had owned a Fenwick fiberglass fly rod with a Pflueger reel, a gift for my 14th birthday, but I never became a "fly fisherman." I knew nothing of the hatch nor the flies. Fly fishermen know about such things. Though my claim to fame, with partial credit going to a local shop owner who selected the fly, I caught an 18-inch rainbow trout from the Owen's river located in a high desert valley on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California.

So I pulled some fly line out, as I mentioned, and start casting from the water's edge. Fly casting involves whipping the line, but not cracking the whip. You bring the pole back, then pause to allow the fly line to lay out, then you cast forward, while feeding new line each time, thus extending the distance the fly travels in front of you with each forward cast.

I kept doing that, then stopped, the fly landed. "No," I thought, "not far enough, not laid out gently upon the water." I did this three or four times until finally I was satisfied, "there." The fly line had laid out gently upon the water, with the leader line trailing and the fly landing last. This was the first presentation. The other attempts were me making adjustments; trying to remember how to send out a far, but proper cast.

Suddenly, a giant creature appeared at the water's surface. There was no warning; not a splash nor even a notable ripple launched, just a slow rising appearance much akin to the buoyancy a submarine demonstrates

when it breaches the water's surface. I had once seen a Marlin float at the surface like that, which was my first thought, "it's a Marlin!"

The great big fish drifted forward eight or so inches with no visible locomotive movement, just a slow frontward motion like a crocodile advancing upon prey. Then it swiftly swirled and disappeared beneath the water.

I had no idea what had just happened, till the line tightened and the clicking sound of the fly-reel began to accelerate. It was then I knew I had hooked an enormous, near refrigerator-size Roosterfish.

My cousin, aware of what had happened, hurried over to coach me. He understood; seeing a creature of superior magnitude take the fly he had tied, and that should I try to muscle this great big fish, I might snap his expensive rod in two.

The big fish swam incessantly away from the island, demanding more and more line.

Unfortunately, there is no significant drag mechanism on a fly reel. Some resistance can be adjusted, but nothing that would coax a determined fish of this size to change its course. I placed my hand gently against the spinning fly-reel, hoping the added friction might get it to turn.

Though, truthfully, what a fisherman wants is of no concern to a gargantuan fish as this, as it barrels out to sea, stealing the line it requires. There would be no deviation from its trajectory. It was as if the fly had snagged the side of a double decker ferry traveling to some distant destination. There would be no stopping it, and only a matter of time before the fly line would run out and the fish would escape its tether.

By now my facial expression had turned from astonishment to slight discontent as it was never more clear; this wasn't my dream; this was my cousin's dream, plus my arms were already starting to tire. I turned toward my cousin offering the fly rod, "Here, take the pole would ya?"

My offer was immediately declined. His dream wasn't to be handed a pole with a fish attached. That wasn't it.

After a side to side "no" shake of the head from my cousin. I reciprocated an irritated, well manufactured constipated smile. I had hooked a great big fish, or maybe it had hooked itself? One thing for sure, it was far from over. When it would be, no one could predict. Though likely, when the fly reel lost its last inch of fly line followed by a loud "snap" sound, then it would be over. Then myself and the great big fish would be free to go on our way, and get on with this beautiful day.

The rooster stole more and more line; so says the clicking of the reel as the fish reached forty, fifty, then sixty, followed by seventy-five yards out to sea. It wasn't going to stop, and nothing could convince this fish of anything as it continued to swim west of the island.

One hundred yards of line consumed, the length of an American football field, and the great big fish still wasn't satisfied, devouring quickly another ten yards. I quickly applied slightly more pressure to the fly reel... One hundred and twenty, then one hundred and thirty, followed by one hundred and forty-five yards of fly line gone.

My arms had weakened to the point where I could barely hold the pole with one hand, while applying resistance to the spinning fly reel with the other. I am a big man, but not a strong man. I snorkel for exercise, which is a gentle activity, nothing like roping a steer or fighting a great big fish. I was no match to battle a creature possessing such monumental proportions.

I applied a little more pressure in a feeble attempt to slow the clicking as the shedding of line continued at an alarming rate. This did not concern the fish, despite my efforts, the once full reel that held 200 yards of line was nearing the end. Soon the fish would be declared the victor after it barreled down the

final stretch of fly line.

I looked at my cousin with that smile again; one that says, "Isn't this nice?" This was not my dream, and although I wanted this experience to instantly end, another part of me was curious. I hoped the fish might surface so we could get a better look at it, but clearly, it was so far out to sea, binoculars would be necessary to enjoy such a sighting.

We both looked on as the Roosterfish peeled away one-hundred sixty-yards, then sixty-five and then one hundred seventy-five. Then at one hundred and eighty-five yards; just fifteen yards short of two American football fields long, it happened....

The reel went silent.

The clicking stopped; the spinning halted, the line slackened. The fish had turned. This great big Roosterfish had changed its great big fish mind. It was coming home. It had turned around and was heading back to where it began; back to where we stood

alone on a sandy point along the western shore of a deserted desert island in the Sea of Cortez.

I reeled frantically to gather the slackened fly line in order to maintain it as taught, offering only a gentle invite, not suggesting that I'm the new boss. Surely, it wouldn't accept such a proposition.

To say the reeling was challenging, an understatement; grueling or arduous, closer to the mark, as my significantly weakened arms were now on fire with pain. All I could do was try to turn the reel handle and gather line that the big fish had demanded; first reeling in a hundred yards, then a hundred and twenty-five. I was on auto-pilot. Exhaustion erased my wavering faith that this would ever end. My role seemed almost obligatory.

Hooking this big fish was in no way my dream, not for even one second had I adopted it as my own. Sure, I was curious to get a look at this Lock Ness Rooster. It was

the largest fish I had ever hooked, clearly a mossy back creature, old and wise as a fish can be. I was familiar with its strength and ferocity; its appetite for freedom, and while I hadn't seen its entire body, I could tell from what was visible, when it snatched the fly, that it was long and broad; a worthy opponent for any full grown man with a dream to catch a great big fish. But that wasn't my dream, this wasn't my dream. I wanted "this" to end, and end now!

With all that being true, however, somewhere in time, at some exact point during the battle with this Mini-Cooper sized fish; a fish I tried desperately to pawn off on my cousin, something changed inside of me, like a switch had been flipped. I now wanted to land this fish right upon the shore. This was never my intent; I was simply going along for the ride and never thought he'd change direction, but once he turned and steadily headed our way, the dream took root like a contagion. I now wanted more than anything to catch this great big fish.

This seemingly endless undertaking continued with more and more turning of the reel handle as the fish swam further toward where we stood, until finally, he was forty-yards from the beach. My cousin handed me his "smart" phone, concerned it might get wet should he try to grab this giant from the water; should it reach the shore. Our only option to document this fish was placed into my pocket. I had no use for it; didn't know how to operate a smart phone, had resisted owning one, as I resisted music CD's in the 1990's when I had a perfectly fine cassette tape collection.

I reeled steadily as the fish swam back to where it began; back to the beach from where we stood. The big fish batted his head slightly from side to side, once maybe twice, then continued his perpendicular course. Soon, he was upon us.

As the fish swam along the sea's shallow edge, I timed a good pull of the fly line right as the wind wave pushed him further toward the shore. The water then quickly retreated,

and there he lie; bone dry on the sand, a creature the size of none I have witnessed; a 40-50-pound Roosterfish flapping on the sand, just two times. My cousin pounced toward it, then hesitated. Had it been a salmon I would have screamed "grab the gosh-darn tail NOW!" But because it was a huge old fish that we wouldn't eat, I wasn't as concerned about its capture; just amazed to finally see it up close.

In an instant, the next wind wave came, bringing enough water to provide opportunity for escape, and so it did, as it pitched upright, riding the swell back to deeper water. Fly line peeled out as the fish fled; more line lost, more clicking and fighting the fish. I again offered the pole to my cousin without success. With blistered thumb, and aching shoulders on fire, I could barely hold the pole upright, but I kept at it, hoping the fish would turn, and that the end would soon arrive.

The big Rooster did turn, after a ten-minute fight; an unnecessary battle; had only my

cousin just grabbed the tail and not hesitated. His determination likely derailed from apprehension of wrestling such an enormous creature. Surely, it wouldn't take kindly to being handled.

The big fish reversed course, choosing a direct landward trajectory, requiring rapid reeling to keep the fallen line taught. I offered a slightly stronger invite this time.

I reeled until the Rooster swam by in two feet of water, and like before, my cousin hurried to make a grab for the tail but to no avail. The Rooster shot quickly out to sea one final time, but not with the same fury as before. The big fish then turned back to shore at a forty-five degree angle. I reeled the line quickly to guide him to where I stood. Then the fish set a near parallel course along the beach and entered shallow water. Like before, I pulled as the wind wave pushed. The water quickly retreated, leaving the big fish high and dry on its side when it rolls over the fishing line, once, then twice, and with help from the following wave, off

he swam. This time, without the hook. He had shook the hook loose and disappeared into the deep blue water of La Ventana Bay; free once again; no longer tethered to a dream. I hoped he would be ok.

The battle with a colossal fish had ended with not one photo taken; no proof that it ever happened; no carcass rotting in the bay to support the story; no evidence to assist any claim. Nothing but a tale of one man's dream transported to another man who did his best to survive the situation. While the great big fish had found it's freedom, so too had the fisherman who stood no longer with a look of great constipation, now, only a weary but resolute calm defined his face as he gazed out across the sea. The chain of discontentment had been broken.

I was so glad it was over.

Morning was still young; fly casting had just begun; I had made only one proper presentation, yet I could barely lift my arms to summon a taxi. I still wanted to fish some

more, but for smaller fish- no big ones please. I didn't want to catch a great big fish ever again, no thank you, thanks. Though, I worried if I continued fishing, I might hook one when I am no match for even a much, much lesser fish.

So I asked my cousin. "Hey, if I hook a good-sized fish would you help reel it in? Cause there's no way I can with these arms that are toast!" With mouth pursed, his head shifted slightly from side to side, the verdict was in; "no." Finally, I accepted where he stood with regards to such a request.

That was it. I didn't fish again that day, just that one proper cast. My cousin continued fly casting. Fortunately, Humberto caught us a nice fish for the restaurant where we ate dinner and talked about our day fly fishing on the island and encountering a truly great fish.

The next day, my cousin out-fished me by a mile. He is a fly fisherman. He landed a dozen good fish; one big dorado. It took me

forty-five minutes to hook even one small Roosterfish, even with the boat surrounded by schools of dozens that Humberto had chummed using sardines. I was reduced to being the camera man gathering footage of my cousin's conquests. He had again found all the eggs on Easter morning, except this time I wasn't pouting. I was glad things worked out for him, fishing wise. He had come a long way, and while he still carried his dream of catching a great big Roosterfish from shore, he seemed satisfied; the trip had been a success.

The great big fish in the oceans and in the seas may be in peril, but they are safe from me now. I will never pursue one ever again, and god now knows, I have no dream to hook nor catch a giant fish anytime ever. I'll stick to photographing live coral reef fish. Hopefully, this will be the last "Great Big Fish Story" I ever write. My fingers are crossed!

William Ihne, a naturalist, videographer, writer, living in El Sargento. Visit his YT channels, Observing Baja Coral Reef Fish or Personal Discovery Channel to learn more about his video projects.

*"A Great Big Fish Story, Again!" is from his second book of short non-fiction stories, called *Fragments of a Life II* to be released fall of 2024.*