

TWO DAYS IN ACAPULCO



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FishMap.org

It was early morning when our plane cleared the haze of Mexico City for the short jump to Acapulco where a boat was waiting for us at the docks. Benjamin (Ben) Cantrell and I had just spent a week with a goodeid study group traveling to obscure locales in Morelos, Michoacán, and Jalisco. Guided by Dr. John Lyons and Dr. Norman Mercado, and sponsored by the North American Goodeid Working Group, we had sought out native fish species from locations including mountain lakes at over 10,000 feet elevation and the shores of Lake Chapala. While the rest of the group spent time netting and electroshocking, Ben and I spent our time using tiny hooks to catch tiny fish. We had decided earlier on that we would round the trip out with a few days of saltwater fishing and a shot at some new species.

Roberto met us at the airport with an air-conditioned van, a pot of coffee, and a cooler full of beer. Another species angler, George, whom Roberto referred to lovingly as Señor Jorge, had hooked us up with Roberto. Roberto entertained us with stories and legends of Acapulco on the way into the city, occasionally interrupting himself to say things like “This is the Diamond Zone. *Zona de Diamantes!*” or “At first I could not find you when you got off the plane! I was expecting you to be much older and I did not recognize you.” I particularly enjoyed the way he referred to Ben as *Ben-hay-meen*.

As we traveled down the main artery of Acapulco, the Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán, I was very impressed with the cleanliness and modernity of the city. It was one of the most beautiful locations we had seen on our trip. Our primary mission was to procure some bait and lunch before we hit the water, and the first grocery store we stopped at did not have anything usable as bait, but we did get a couple of fantastic sandwiches. The second grocery

store we stopped at had whole squid by the package, so we grabbed one and hurried to the boat. I had noticed during our drive groups of soldiers from the army and navy standing every few hundred feet dressed in full battle gear with automatic weapons (Figure 1). As we passed an armored personnel carrier I said, “Hey Roberto, what is up with all the soldiers?” Roberto waved his hands towards a group of soldiers and said, “It is nothing, my friend, it is just for show so that the tourists feel safe.” I nodded, but I had my doubts.

We finally reached the Señora Cotorrona (Figure 2), where Captain Mike and first mate Miguel were waiting to cast off. We made plans to meet Roberto back at the shore a few hours after the charter got back so that we could spend some time fishing around the docks and rocks as well. As we threw our gear and luggage onto the boat and Miguel cast us off, Roberto yelled towards the captain, “Just like Señor Jorge!” while pointing at us. Captain Mike gave us a thumbs up and said “Like Señor Jorge” and we were off. As we headed out towards the far shore of the bay the captain pointed out schools of skipjacks crashing across the surface.

It turned out that they already had squid on board so we added ours to the pile and started fishing off the rocky shores of the Las Playas Peninsula. I got the first fish on

Photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

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Figure 1. Armed soldiers in Acapulco.



Figure 2. The Señora Cotorrona.



Figure 3. Beaubrummel (*Stegastes flavilatus*).



Figure 4. Male Chameleon Wrasse (*Halichoeres dispilus*).



Figure 5. Longnose Puffer (*Sphoeroides lobatus*). (Photo by Ben Cantrell)



Figure 6. Longspine Porcupinefish (*Diodon holocanthus*). (Photo by Ben Cantrell)

board, landing an Acapulco Damselfish (*Stegastes acapulcoensis*), Beaubrummel (*Stegastes flavilatus*) (Figure 3), and both male and female Chameleon Wrasse (*Halichoeres dispilus*) (Figure 4) in short order. Ben was not far behind and pulled in his own damselfish as well as Longnose Puffer (*Sphoeroides lobatus*) (Figure 5) and an amazing Longspine Porcupinefish (*Diodon holocanthus*) (Figure 6). We cast towards the rocky shore and watched young men climb and dive from the cliffs, then swim out to the tour boats for tips. After our 20th or so damselfish we changed locations towards deeper water and fished near a buoy. This buoy and every buoy we fished around during the two days were stacked with Finescale Triggerfish (*Balistes polylepis*) (Figure 7), which congregated around the anchor chains. It was the only thing near them, but they were plentiful. They were fun to catch and the crew was keeping them for dinner, but we had to move on because catching triggerfish after triggerfish is not good for species hunting. As we drifted over the deeper water towards

some of the moored sailboats Ben pulled in probably the most interesting fish of the whole trip, a Bullseye Jawfish (*Opistognathus scops*) (Figure 8). I managed to catch a Sauro Lizardfish (*Synodus lacertinus*) in roughly the same location. As the day ran on we tried different spots with varied results including under the sailboats for dozens of Pacific Red Snapper (*Lutjanus peru*) as well as catching Spotted Grouper (*Epinephelus analogus*) (Figure 9), Banded Wrasse (*Halichoeres notospilus*), Panama Graysby (*Cephalopholis panamensis*), Orangeside Triggerfish (*Sufflamen verres*) (Figure 10), and Spottail Grunt (*Haemulon maculicauda*) out over the rocks.

Our Spanish was practically non-existent and their English was just as bad, so communicating was an interesting challenge. We learned all the different things they called *cabrilla* and it was amusing watching Ben trying to explain the English name “jawfish”. Manuel started looking up words on his phone at some point for translation, but this rarely helped. At one point he showed us

the word “keychain.” Once, as I was washing my hands in the water off the side of the boat Miguel stopped me and said, “No.” He then pointed to an onboard water source I should use instead. I nodded while looking at the cooler full of fish, wondering what he was worried about in the water.

As our first day on the boat wound down and we arrived back at the docks, we were eager to find a spot along the shore to continue fishing until Roberto could pick us up. We were told that we could not fish around the boats so we had the crew help negotiate with the owner of one of the docks. He had a small shop at the front of the dock and, for the price of a round of cold beers for everybody present, we were allowed onto the dock to fish.

We immediately noticed dozens of Guineafowl Puffers (*Arothron meleagris*) cruising the waters but no matter what we did we could not get them interested in anything we offered. I have seen them caught on hook and line before, but much time was wasted this day in



Figure 7. Finescale Triggerfish (*Balistes polylepis*). (Photo by Ben Cantrell)



Figure 9. Spotted Grouper (*Epinephelus analogus*).



Figure 8. Bullseye Jawfish (*Opistognathus scops*). (Photo by Ben Cantrell)



Figure 10. Orangeside Triggerfish (*Sufflamen verres*). (Photo by Ben Cantrell)



Figure 11. Cortez Rainbow Wrasse (*Thalassoma lucasanum*).
(Photo by Ben Cantrell)

trying to accomplish this task. We both caught beautiful Cortez Rainbow Wrasse (*Thalassoma lucasanum*) (Figure 11), and I finally got my Longnose Puffer after Ben had caught about a dozen on the boat. I also foul-hooked a species of trumpet fish, but didn't really get a good picture or identification. Overall, the fishing from the dock wasn't that great, especially with all the time wasted on the puffers. Roberto picked us up and we headed to our hotel after learning that tomorrow we would be heading to Punta Bruja—Witches Point.

On the way back to the hotel we had Roberto stop and let us look at the fish market on the beach (Figures 12 and 13). They had many different species and it was interesting seeing them sitting on a table off the beach with no ice or refrigeration nearby. There were many species on the tables that we had not caught yet.

We had picked our hotel specifically because of the rocks behind it, where George had fished and had good luck. As soon as we checked in we scrambled down to the rocks and started fishing. It was a difficult area to fish and in the end, as the sunlight was fading and the tide started to come in, we were pushed back into fishing the tidal cracks as the water edged higher. We both managed to pull tiny Mexican Night Sergeant (*Abudefduf declivifrons*) (Figure 14) and Tinsel Squirrelfish (*Sargocentron suborbitale*) out of the surging tide. I also managed to get a Panamic Sergeant Major (*Abudefduf troschelii*).

As the sun was setting we returned to our room for a quick shower and then went out to look for dinner. We found a nice taco place on the main avenue and, after having to pull one of the kitchen staff out of the back to explain something to us in English, we ordered our food, which was a perfect end to the day. Back in the



Figures 12 and 13. Fish Market on the Acapulco Beach. (Photos by Ben Cantrell)

room, as I drifted off to sleep, a loud noise jerked me awake. "Was that a gunshot?" I asked Ben. "Nope," he replied and I mostly believed him.

The next morning on our way back to the boat Roberto stopped at El Zorrito, a famous local restaurant open 24 hours. Hung-over patrons from the night before crowded around the tables as Roberto walked behind the counter and helped us procure take-away tacos for lunch. Once onboard Captain Mike headed out towards Punta Bruja, where we began trolling for some bigger species. As the sun began to peak over the hills, the first fish struck. Ben grabbed the line and, after a solid battle, landed a stunning Pacific Sierra Mackerel (*Scomberomorus sierra*) (Figure 15). Shortly after that, I pulled in a Black Skipjack (*Euthynnus lineatus*) and then Ben landed a Striped Bonito (*Sarda orientalis*). I lost my own Pacific Sierra Mackerel at the boat, but I was able to pull in a nice Pacific Crevalle Jack (*Caranx caninus*) (Figure 16). At one point, while Manuel was attempting to take the hook out of one of the fish, the boat rocked and the fish jumped in just the right way that a treble hook went deep into his hand. I handed



Figure 14. Mexican Night Sergeant (*Abudefduf declivifrons*).



Figure 16. Pacific Crevalle Jack (*Caranx caninus*) with Punta Bruja in the background. (Photo by Ben Cantrell)



Figure 15. Ben with his Pacific Sierra Mackerel (*Scomberomorus sierra*).



Figure 17. Captain Mike, Ryan Crutchfield, Ben Cantrell, Manuel.

my pliers to Ben and watched as he counted to three and yanked the hook out. Manuel never even flinched; he just went back to work. We continued trolling for a while, but the bite died down as the sun got higher in the sky, so we switched back to bottom fishing, this time off the deeper rocks of Punta Bruja.

I didn't end up catching anything new for the rest of the day and we managed to mostly catch various damselfish, snapper, and triggerfish. Ben, as usual, did manage to get more new species for the day including a Rivulated Mutton Hamlet (*Alphestes multiguttatus*) and a Pacific Mutton Hamlet (*Alphestes immaculatus*). Much of the day was spent with Captain Mike jokingly chastising us for catching fish too small for him to keep, yelling "*Más grande!*" whenever we pulled up a tiny snapper.

Roberto picked us up at the end of the day and we thanked the crew (Figure 17). I ended up giving them my rubber boots, which I did not feel like packing back home and both Ben and I gave Manuel tackle and lead-

er material he was interested in. Between us both we caught 23 different species, and we saw many more in the water and in the fish market. We thanked Roberto after he dropped us off at the airport, and we flew back to Mexico City on our way back home.

We were in Mexico in middle to late February of 2017. About a month beforehand, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán had been extradited to the United States. I don't fully understand the dynamics of Mexico, but it has been suggested to me the power vacuum left in his wake has caused the violence there to reach all-time record levels. Planned fishing trips to Los Cabos have been shelved because our local contacts on the ground have told us it is too dangerous. I later learned that Acapulco has been the murder capital of Mexico for five years straight and the government keeps that heavy military presence we saw in the tourist areas to keep the chaos at bay. I hope the situation in Mexico improves soon because it was a great place to visit and there are many more fish to be caught.