

Hooked On Pura Vida

WINTER
ESCAPES
2010

BY BOB SEXTON

AS SOON AS I set the hook, I knew something was strange. There was tension on the line, but whatever was at the other end didn't feel like any fish I'd ever caught before. The headshakes were light, then heavy, then absent, then light again. Since it was my first time fishing in Costa Rica, however, I just figured this was the norm. Then I saw what looked like a gull struggling to take off from the water and I realized I'd done what any sane angler would never want to do—catch a bird with a fishing hook.

It was a royal tern, to be exact. "Umm, *tengo un pequeño problema*," I said to Juan Pablo Lopez, the captain of our *panga*, the local style of fibreglass boat. "I've got a small problem." I sheepishly pointed to the bird. He just shrugged and smiled as if I'd told him I like ice cream, or as though he saw birds caught on hooks all the time.

Lopez calmly put the boat in reverse and we headed back to assess the situation. It was around 11 A.M. under a hot sun, and we'd already been trolling for snook, tuna and wahoo in Golfo Dulce along the east side of the Osa Peninsula for about four hours. We hadn't had much luck other than a small jack, and now I'd gone and caught a bird. This was not going to sit well with the guests back at the eco-lodge when they ask how the fishing went.

Fortunately, the hungry bird hadn't swallowed the hook, and had instead gotten stuck in the meaty flesh of its

thigh when it swooped down. As my girlfriend, Norine Williamson, watched in muted horror and clicked a few photos for posterity, Lopez grabbed the bird, laid it out on the motor and held its beak as I twisted out the hook. The injury was surprisingly minor, and when we let the bird go, it stood there for a couple of seconds, looked at us in what I swear was disgust, squawked loudly and flew off, presumably none the worse for wear.

"He was very angry," Lopez said, and laughed. It was an unexpected turn of events, for sure, but that's how it goes when you're travelling and fishing in a foreign country—you have to roll with the punches. All the same, I thought, my offshore trip scheduled for two days later had better go smoother than this. That's not to say Costa Rica is a tough place to enjoy, mind you, even on a bad day.

ONE OF THE MORE remote parts of the country, the Golfo Dulce region is home to 13 major ecosystems, including huge tracts of tropical forest, diverse and plentiful wildlife, giant Jurassic Park-like plants, and world-renowned sportfishing waters. The sportfishing. That's why I'm here. Specifically, I want to catch a billfish, to experience that legendary fight, that stuff of Hemingway-esque literature. And that speed. Clocking in at roughly 110 kilometres an hour, they're among the fastest creatures in the ocean.

Billfish are also fearsome predators.

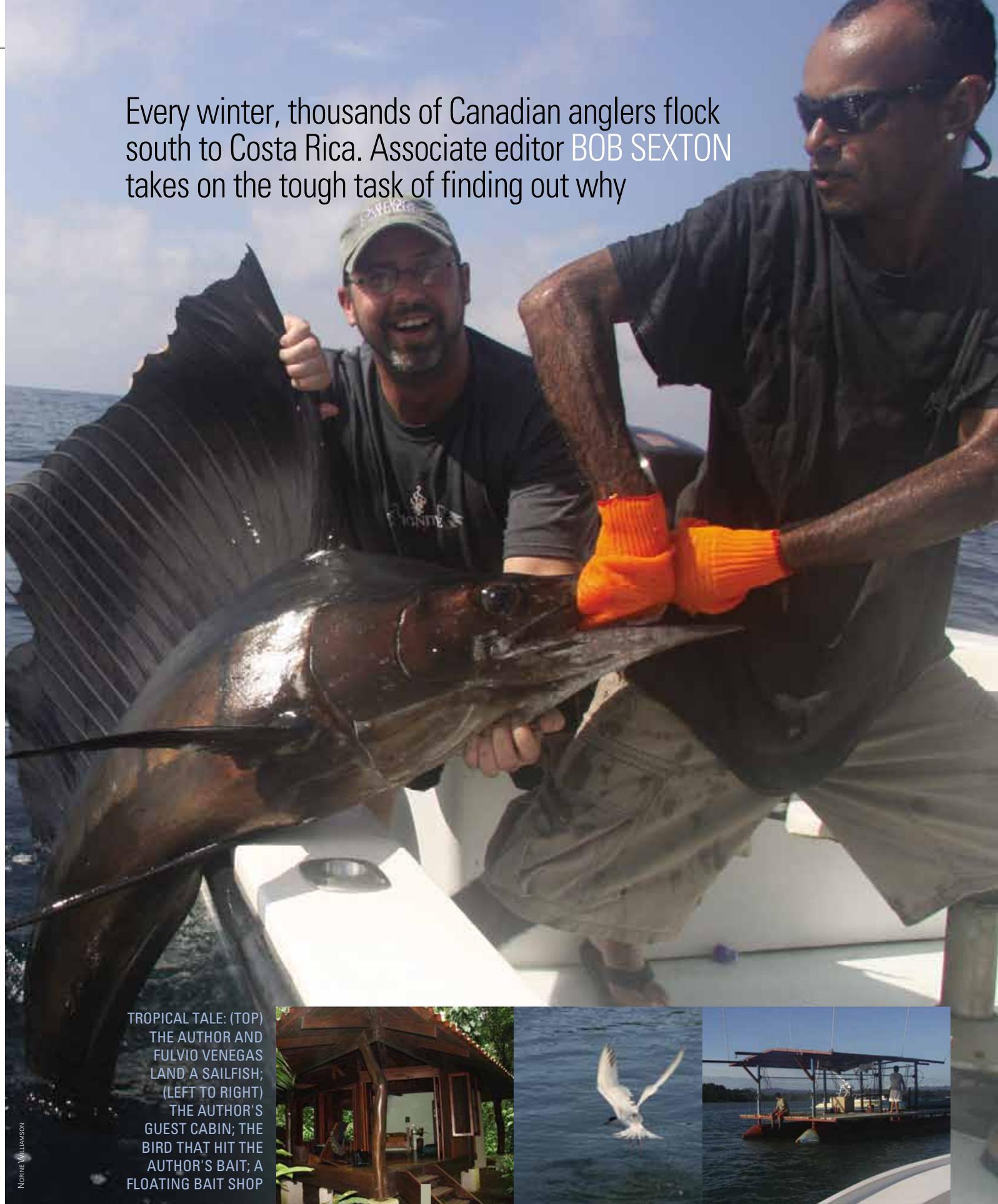
Alone or sometimes in groups, they'll swim up to a school of tuna, mackerel or jack and use their long bills as bludgeons, thrashing and bashing their prey before scooping them up whole into their gaping maws.

There's also an alluring element of danger when you target billfish. If a 400-pound marlin on the line suddenly turns and jumps at the boat, for example, you're going to want to get out of the way—or risk becoming a human shish kebab.

Even getting to this part of the world can be somewhat of an adventure. In our case last December, that meant a nine-hour layover in Atlanta thanks to a missed connection, then a treacherous, nine-hour minivan trip from the Costa Rican capital, San José, to Puerto Jiménez—it would have been a 45-minute flight, but ours was cancelled because of heavy rain.

The last leg, however, made it all worthwhile—a half-hour jaunt across the calm waters of Golfo Dulce by *panga* to the Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge, our home for the next six days. And as the cliché goes, you appreciate something more when you have to work for it.

Of course, we weren't the first Canuck anglers to visit this part of the world. According to a recent study by the Billfish Foundation and the University of Costa Rica, some 4,000 Canadians fished in the country in 2008. Mind you, not all of them ventured to remote Osa. But the way I saw it, every angler needs a base of operations, so why not the jungle?



Every winter, thousands of Canadian anglers flock south to Costa Rica. Associate editor BOB SEXTON takes on the tough task of finding out why

TROPICAL TALE: (TOP) THE AUTHOR AND FULVIO VENEGAS LAND A SAILFISH; (LEFT TO RIGHT) THE AUTHOR'S GUEST CABIN; THE BIRD THAT HIT THE AUTHOR'S BAIT; A FLOATING BAIT SHOP



AFRICAN HUNTING ADVENTURE: AN ESSENTIAL PRIMER P. 47

