

Pass the (California) Roach

by Gerhard Epke
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The plate of fried fish still crackled, and a delicious aroma wafted as my friend passed them around the circle. Eaten with some fries, tartar sauce and vinegar, it was a delicious meal that would probably not have raised an eyebrow on any continent of this earth or at any point in human history. Except that, in this case, the fish being consumed was a local minnow known as the California roach, *Hesperoleucus symmetricus*. It even seemed that our quest to eat a safe and healthy meal of local fish had led us to a place, however improbable, of discovering an overlooked local delicacy.

The West Coast has been a place of ample fishing stocks, presumably leading us to disregard the value of eating many species of small fish. But small schooling 'bait' fish or forage fish such as sardines, herring and anchovies might be precisely what we Marin omnivores are looking for. From clean water they are healthy and safe. Because they are fast-growing and low on the food chain, they do not accumulate mercury like larger piscivorous fish in the Bay, and they are high in omega3 fatty acids that everyone raves about.

California roach seems to be the most common fish in the middle reaches of Corte Madera Creek. These are small native minnows that school in the freshwater pools throughout the spring and summer. Their chunky little brown bodies have a touch of gold, hinting at their distant relation to goldfish. They can live for several years and lay thousands of eggs, but what makes roach so common here is their tolerance of high water temperatures and the fluctuations in dissolved oxygen levels that result from algae growth. They eat filamentous algae, invertebrates, even hitting tiny dry flies from the surface.



The California roach can grow to four inches long. Photo by Charles Kennard

The poor, forgettable, unfortunately-named California roach gets overlooked for so many reasons, and its taxonomy doesn't do it any favors in this regard. As with so many of our wild animals in California, its common name came from a vaguely similar and distantly related European species of minnow, the common roach. The word minnow often gets thrown around for any small fish, but minnows are a specific family of fish, Leuciscidae, within the order of Cypriniformes, which includes carp. Central California roach, *Hesperoleucus symmetricus symmetricus*, is apparently a very symmetrical subspecies of the *hespero*, or western, *leucus* or minnow.

Recent genetic research has defined other subspecies of roach in the western US, but also complicated the picture by indicating that roach commonly hybridize with another species of slightly larger native minnow, the hitch. Hitch, of the genus *Lavinia*, seems to live farther downstream, in sloughs and wetlands. Alas, fishing for anything in our watershed's creeks aside from the tidal portions of the Bay is prohibited. Therefore, as you pack up your fishing gear, I suggest you go for hitch instead, and 'pass' on the roach. But don't be a stranger to our most common fish.

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