

Hooked Don't 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.

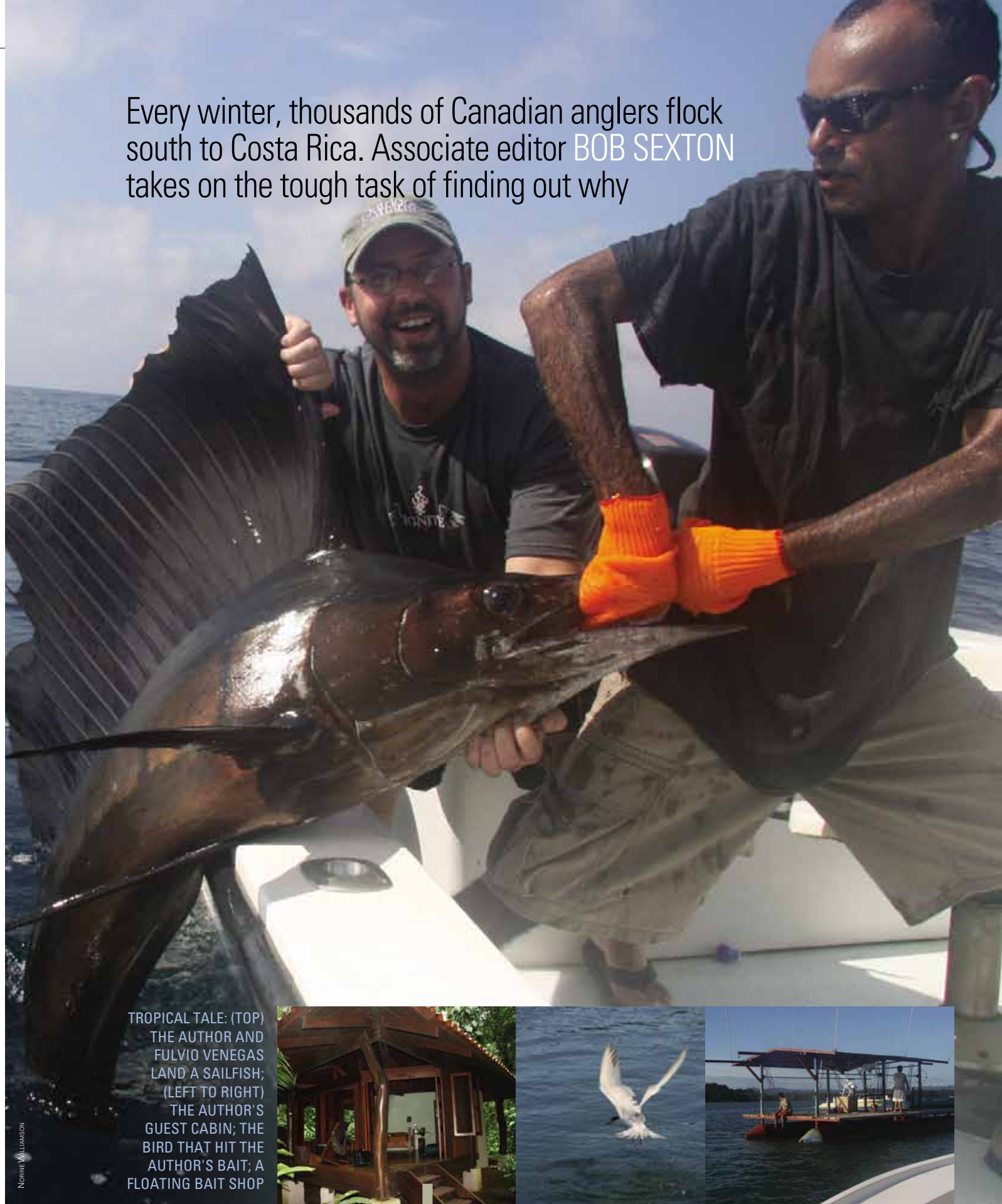
Alone or sometimes in groups, they'll swim up to a school of tuna, mackerel or jack and use their long bills as bludgeons, thrashing and bashing their prey before scooping them up whole into their gaping maws.

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



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BUILT MOSTLY FROM recycled materials and the fallen logs of 18 different species of tree, the Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge fits seamlessly into the lush green environment. And that's no coincidence. Owner Michael Butler and his wife, Donna, speak passionately about wanting to provide a unique outdoor experience for guests, while leaving as small an ecological footprint as possible. "We wanted to build something that had little impact," he says.

Consisting of a main building with a kitchen, bar, communal dining room, open-air lounge and a clutch of guest cabins, the lodge certainly strives to be as comfortable yet sustainable as possible. For starters, the facility is nearly completely run on solar power. So, unlike many fishing lodges in remote parts of Canada, you won't hear the constant hum of a gas-powered generator. As well, all organic waste is composted, and recyclable materials are shipped across the bay to a depot in Puerto Jiménez. There's also a solar drying room for the laundry, along with many more innovative features. "It was an opportunity to showcase different technologies," says Donna.

Of course, the lodge does reside in a rainforest—getting up to 200 inches of rain a year—so there are times when it has to rely on a backup diesel generator. For the most part, though, the solar power system is sufficient, and plans are underway to switch over to a generator that runs on vegetable oil. To offset its use of fossil fuel, meanwhile, the lodge contributes to a program that buys rainforest land for reforestation. As well, visitors who want to mitigate the carbon emissions from their flights can buy credits through the lodge's Web site.

While Playa Nicuesa bills itself as an eco-friendly, multi-sport jungle experience, fishing is certainly one of the main attractions—guests can opt for inshore or offshore guided trips, or head out in outfitted fishing kayaks. And did I mention the rainforest? That's the one thing about the weather here: expect to get wet. While our December visit technically followed the end of the April to November rainy season, Norine and I still got drenched at least once on every day of our trip.

Not that I'd let a little rain get in the way of the fishing.

WERE LOOKING FOR anything but water," Captain John Olson says in a slow southern drawl, standing behind the wheel of his 28-foot Mako. A jumping sailfish, a piece of driftwood or trash, which fish will use as shade, a flock of birds signalling a school of baitfish—anything other than the vast, deep, blue ocean. That and a "square grouper," the local name for packages thrown overboard by drug runners trying to evade the coast guard. "You want to stay way clear of those," says Olson.

Originally from Texas, Olson has been running charters in the area for about 20 years, currently under the banner of Sportfishing Unlimited. Now 43, he first visited Costa Rica with his parents



THE OCEAN BLUE: (FROM TOP) THE AUTHOR FIGHTS HIS MARLIN, MICHAEL BUTLER AND HIS BLUE-FIN TREVALLY; CAPTAIN JOHN OLSON AT DAY'S END



SAILFISH RULES

WHILE in Costa Rica's Golfo Dulce region, I'd been concerned about the impact the local commercial fishery is having on the sailfish population—although visiting sport anglers must practise catch-and-release. Costa Ricans can legally target the fish using long lines. But as it turns out, the area's sailfish population is mostly healthy, according to Russell Nelson, chief scientist with the Miami-based Billfish Foundation.

And things stand to improve. Last January, the sportfishery scored a major coup when Costa Rica banned the export of sailfish meat. Nelson says this should lead to less demand for the fish and, in turn, reduce the commercial harvest. Along with the ban, it's also now illegal for commercial fishermen to use live bait on their long lines.

Sport anglers, too, must follow new regulations. It's now unlawful for catch-and-release fishermen to take billfish out of the water after catching them. That rule came into effect after my visit, making the photo of my sailfish an even more valuable souvenir.

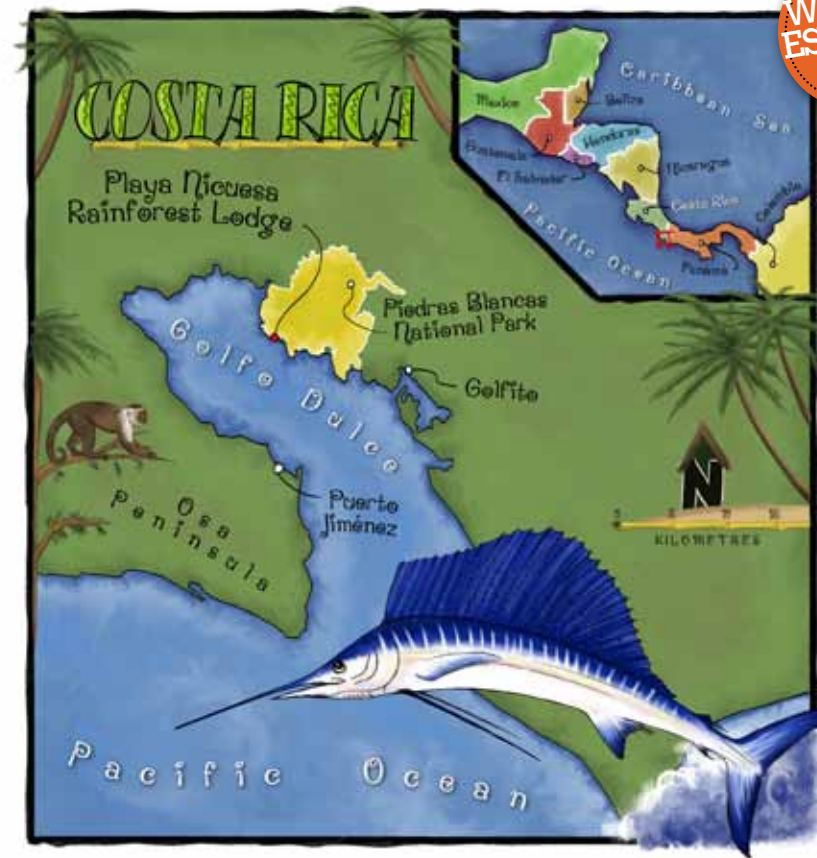
when he was 15. Six years later, he returned to check on some property his father had bought and never left, quickly getting into chartering and working on boats. "I built this," he says, pointing to the Mako's central console. "I built the cooler, built the top, built the seat, everything."

Olson also hand-poured the squid-like plastic lures we're trolling. "They're called chuggers," he says, "and they make a lot of splash." While we also have a bait box with live *ojón*, or goggle eye, that we picked up earlier at the only on-the-water bait shop I've ever seen, Olson says he has the most luck with plastic. "They're squid lures, but you use them in pink, green and all kinds of weird colours that billfish love."

We started out by trolling the chuggers on top of a nameless stretch of ocean about 24 kilometres off the coast from the town of Golfito. It's now about 9:30 A.M., and after two hours of no action I'm getting restless. Then, as if on cue, we see part of a sailfish dorsal fin come out of the water as the giant fish starts to bat around the plastic bait.

Olson's first mate, Fulvio Venegas, grabs one of the other rods rigged with a goggle eye and casts out. He knows that sailfish sometimes swim in packs, so it's not uncommon to get a double-header. Just as his bait hits the water, the sailfish screams off with the chugger, creating a minor panic on board.

Venegas shoves his rod into a holder and grabs the rig that



was just hit, thrusting it into my hands. I rest the rod butt on my upper thigh as he wraps a fighting belt around my waist. The line is still screaming out as I slide the butt into the holder on the belt. My gut is tight with anxiety. We're using circle hooks since they make it easier to release the fish, and I know I have to avoid setting the hook too early.

"Get ready!" Olson shouts. "Now!"

I lock the reel in gear and almost immediately the giant fish jumps clear out of the water about 300 feet behind the boat. It feels huge. And I think I can sense its fury on the end of the line. All I'm thinking is, *Don't break off, don't break off*, although there's not much chance of that. I'm using 80-pound-test braided line with a 200-pound leader, and the Penn reel has been specially beefed up by a guy in California who Olson gets to modify all his reels. The rod, meanwhile, is rated up to 200 pounds.

Still, I'm not taking any chances. I listen to Olson's instructions, keeping tension on the line, reeling when I drop the tip and letting the fish take line when it's on a run. The fish clears the water again and Norine manages to catch it on film, even though it's still a couple of hundred feet away.

After about 15 minutes, my arms start to burn, but I'm feeling good and the fish is close. I get it to the side of the boat and Venegas reaches down with a gloved hand and

grabs the leader and the fish's bill. Then he fumbles and the fish shakes loose. I'm thinking the worst. But no, it's still on.

Now the fish takes off for another run, nearly diving straight beneath the boat. There's more minor panic and random shouting as I work it back in and around the stern to the opposite side of the boat. This time, Venegas is able to hang on to the thrashing beast. He slips the hook, hauls the fish up on the side for a couple of quick, foggy pictures—the camera got wet during the fight—then drops it back in the water.

Olson figures the fish weighed around 100 pounds, an average size for the area. It's nowhere near the 221-pound world record caught in Ecuador in 1947, but it's a personal best for me and I'm stoked—especially since I'm too early for the prime January to March billfish season.

We get another sailfish hit around 11:30 A.M. and this time it's Michael Butler's turn in the fighting chair, but the fish shakes off before he can land it. A few hours later, he makes up for the loss by nailing a nice bluefin trevally and a crevalle jack (which the chef in the lodge kitchen makes into the freshest sushi I've ever had).

It's around 4 P.M. when the sky turns dark, the wind picks up and the rain starts to spit. With that, Olson points the bow toward home. We crack a beer, buckle down for the wet ride and listen to him talk

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GOLFO DULCE PLANNER

GETTING THERE: Flights from major cities across North America regularly land in the Costa Rican capital, San José. From there, it's a 45-minute flight, typically in a Cessna Caravan (pictured) to either Puerto Jiménez or Golfito, the two main towns on either side of Golfo Dulce.

ACCOMMODATION: Whether you're looking for a backpacker's hostel or a luxury resort, there are numerous options to choose from. Crocodile Bay near Puerto Jiménez is popular with sport anglers. I was a guest at Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge, a short boat trip from either Golfito or Puerto Jiménez.

PERMITS: Fishing licences cost U.S.\$25 and can be provided by your outfitter.

GEAR: Book a trip with a recommended outfitter to ensure the proper rods, reels, tackle and bait are included.

CLOTHING: Costa Rica's Golfo Dulce region gets more rain than anywhere else in the country, so be sure to bring decent raingear. It can be hot and humid throughout the year; during the prime fishing season (January to March), the average temperature is about 27°C.

MORE INFO: Costa Rica Tourism Board, 1-866-267-8274; www.visitcostarica.com. Sportfishing Unlimited, 011-506-2-776-0036; www.sportfishingu.com. Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge, 1-866-504-8116; www.playanicuesa.com.

about the laidback Costa Rican lifestyle and the ups and downs of his job. Just before we arrive at the dock, the rain stops and Olson sums up life as a charter captain in the tropics. "Long hours and low pay, but look at the office," he says, gesturing at the beautiful, lush surroundings. As the locals would say, it's *pura vida*, which literally means "pure life," but is better translated as "good living."

With great fishing thrown in for good measure. ♦

Bob Sexton (Butler, Olson, Plaine), Norine Williamson (Sexton), Robert Birch (Map)