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3

# NATURE

## CONSERVANCY



## Water Colors

MAKING A FINE ART  
OF OCEAN  
CONSERVATION



[ fig. 1 ]



BY JASON KERSTEN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON HOUSTON

# WATER COLORS

Using the tools of his trade, artist James Prosek does more than capture the wild beauty of Atlantic fish—he paints a compelling case for protecting them.



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST: (Left) James Prosek in his Easton, Connecticut, studio.  
(Above) Crevalle jack (or common jack), *Caranx hippos*, Marco Island, Florida

# I

IN 2001, ARTIST, WRITER AND NATURALIST James Prosek was driving by a Citgo gas station in Cape Cod when something beautiful caught his eye. Its color, lines and curves—its gleaming perfection—were unlike anything Prosek had ever seen. He pulled into the station and walked inside to inquire about it.

“Whose old Chevy truck is that out front?” he asked the station’s owner. “It’s amazing.”

The station’s owner, Norman St. Pierre, explained that the ’54 Chevy belonged to a friend and invited Prosek into his office. There the artist saw another, even more fascinating object, one that would launch him on a 10-year journey.

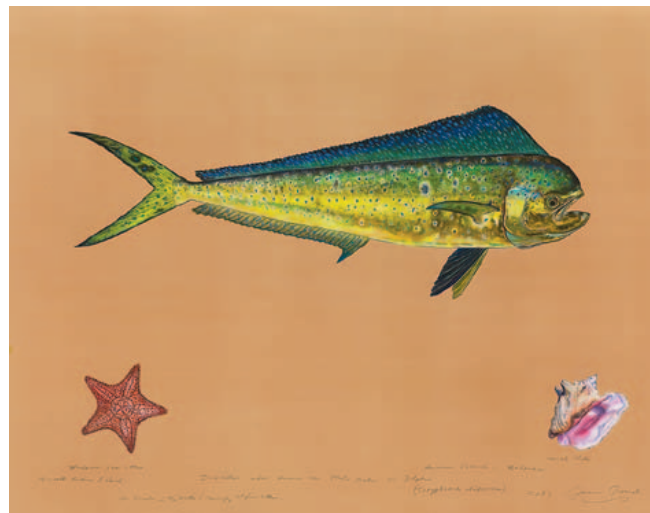
It was just an old photograph of a commercial fishing vessel. But the fish on its deck—bluefin tuna—were massive, bigger than men. And Prosek, who, as the author and artist of *Trout: An Illustrated History* and *Trout of the World*, has perhaps painted more fish than just about any other person alive, was stunned. Then and there, he knew that he wanted to see a bluefin for himself and paint it as he saw it the moment it came out of the water, lit by both the light of the sun and its own internal fire.

“I don’t think a lot of people understand how monumental some of these creatures are,” Prosek says 11 years later as he sits on the floor of his studio in Easton, Connecticut, contemplating the life-size watercolor of a bluefin tuna on his wall.

For Prosek, rendering a nine-and-a-half-foot-long, 750-pound bluefin to scale was an inherently preservational act. Bluefin populations—along with those of numerous other Atlantic game species—are perilously low. Western Atlantic bluefin, in fact, are estimated to be at less than 3 percent of their 1960 levels. The once-ubiquitous fish are now so rare that a single giant bluefin can fetch thousands of dollars in a Japanese market. >> CONTINUED ON PAGE 34



[ fig. 2 ] Cod, *Gadus morhua*, Chatham, Cape Cod, Massachusetts



[fig. 3-8]

(Left to right across rows): **Black sea bass**, *Centropristis striata*, Dartmouth, Massachusetts. **Yellowfin tuna**, *Thunnus albacares*, Bimini, Bahamas. **Barracuda**, *Sphyraena barracuda*, South Andros Island, Bahamas. **Dorado**, *Coryphaena hippurus*, Andros Island, Bahamas. **Florida pompano**, *Trachinotus carolinus*, St. Lucie River, Stuart, Florida. **Red snapper**, *Lutjanus campechanus*, Cumberland Island, Georgia. (Fish not shown to scale).

“If I see my reflection  
in the eyeball of the fish or  
whatever, I’ll paint that in.”



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“**It’s me and the fish.** I’ve kind of described [the paintings] as self-portraits in a way. When [the fish] comes on the deck, it’s not only lit internally, but it’s like a swimming mirror, reflecting the world around it. On some of the bigger fish you can usually see me leaning over the fish. Or if I see some color from my rain jacket, I’ll put that in the fish.”

**WORK OF ART:** Prosek may spend up to 14 hours a day in his studio, where he prefers to paint in a mix of natural and artificial light.

[ fig. 9 ]

**Mutton snapper**  
*Lutjanus analis*  
South Andros Island, Bahamas

“I painted [things] that I saw on different trips that appear as elements beneath the pictures, like in this painting of the mutton snapper that I caught in South Andros Island in the Bahamas. There’s a row of mangrove leaves, which take on different colors when they drop off the tree, and this sort of purple land crab. I chose things that, to me, accentuated the form or color of the fish and help the viewer sort of see parts that I wanted them to see.”

## “An individual fish has all these beautiful marks and scratches just from living.”

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

Prosek finally got to see his live bluefin with the help of St. Pierre. The station owner also happened to be a Cesna pilot who spotted tuna for a harpoon boat. Through the brotherhood of fishermen, he eventually snagged Prosek a privileged spot on a boat.

The bluefin was just the beginning. Prosek eventually set out to paint an entire collection of life-size Atlantic game fish—the same species that we want to both save and savor.

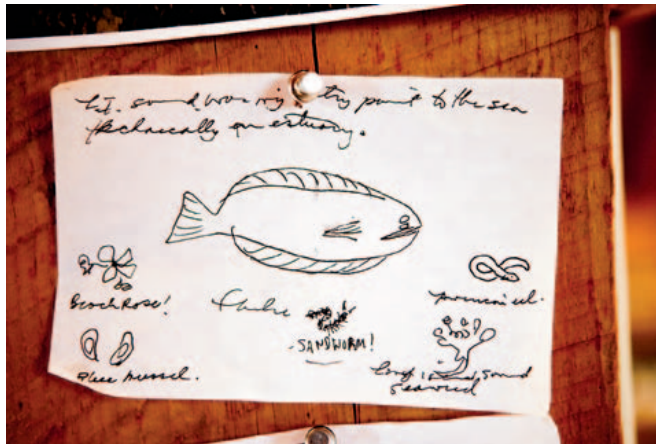
“I wanted to paint fish that are important to humans. Mostly food and game fish—a lot of them are being exploited. But also some of the larger or more colorful or hard-fighting or magnificent fish in the Atlantic,” says Prosek.

This deeply personal endeavor would take the artist to the far corners of the Atlantic, including the Cape Verde Islands, the Bahamas, Florida, Rhode Island and Montauk, Long Island. He would see and paint 35 fish in all—giants like swordfish and big blue marlin, and dinner-table staples like Nassau grouper and tautog.

For Prosek, painting and preserving nature are inseparable. “Without these sources of awe and inspiration, we would have no faith, we would have no spirituality, we’d have no art,” he says. “They’re the sources of everything that we are. Without [nature], it would be a very pale and depressing existence.”

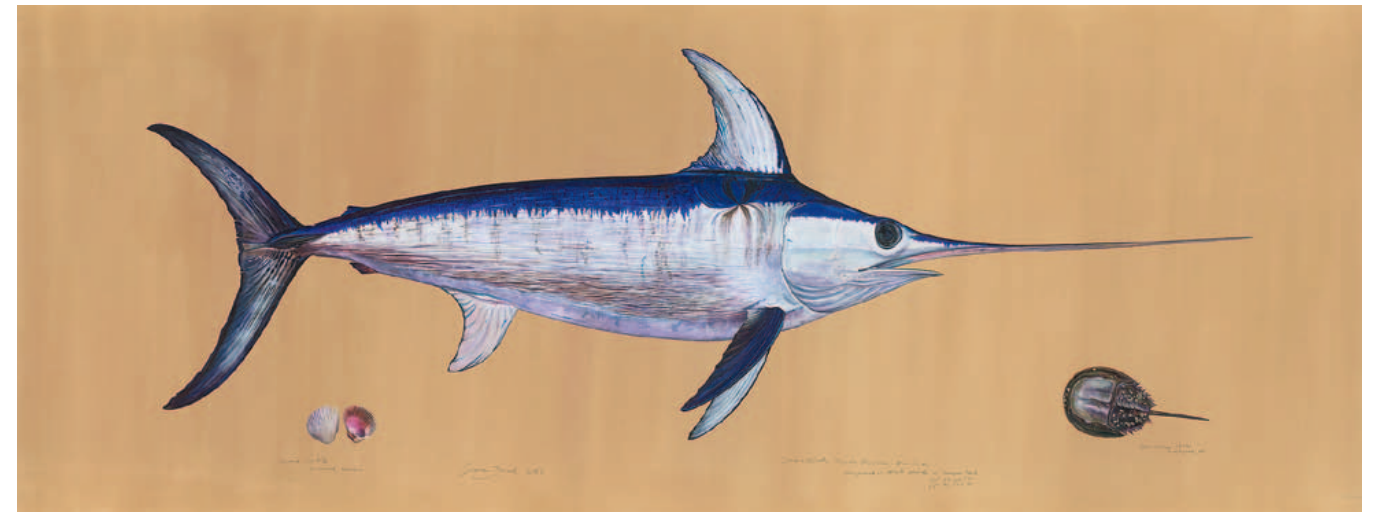
No two paintings (or fish) are alike. But each image clearly captures the animal’s beauty in a fleeting moment when the fish—still vibrant, still emanating colors that will drain away only with death—is pulled from its world and enters ours. ■





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[ fig 10-11 ]

**Mako shark**  
*Isurus oxyrinchus*  
Montauk, Long Island,  
New York

**Swordfish**  
*Xiphias gladius*  
George's Bank, Woods  
Harbour, Nova Scotia

"I went up to Woods Harbour in Nova Scotia, which is one of the few harbors in the world where they harpoon swordfish. I just started talking with this captain as they were unloading a boat with 16 swordfish. He asked, 'Where are you from?' And I said I just drove up from Connecticut, like 22 hours, to see a swordfish in its living colors so I could paint it life-size. And he said, 'You've never seen a color blue on land like the color of a swordfish. ... If you ever met a girl with eyes the color of a swordfish, you'd leave whoever you were with and go with her.'"

"I like experimenting with materials. I tried to get some of the silvery sheen on the fish by mixing different mineral powders, powdered mica and pigments into the paint. Some of [the fish] I almost didn't paint as intensely colored as they are because I just didn't think people would believe it."

**FIELD STUDIES:** Prosek takes extensive notes and measurements so that he can more accurately depict the fish when he returns to his studio.



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**Explore**

Tour the artist's studio in our panoramic view.

**Watch**

Travel to the Bahamas with James Prosek as he searches for the kaleidoscopic bonefish.

**Listen**

Hear Prosek discuss why he's hooked on fish.



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**“I could not believe** these fish were so huge. They looked like sculptures—polished marble sides, glistening steel backs, fins like blades of metal, eyes like miniature Earths with atmospheres and seas and forests and deserts.”

**CANVASSING:** Prosek used 60-inch-tall rolls of paper cut to size and dyed with up to 20 bags of tea.



**“You’ve never seen**  
a color blue on land like the color of a swordfish. ...  
If you ever met a girl with eyes the color  
of a swordfish, you’d leave whoever  
you were with and go with her.”



[ fig. 12 ] Nassau grouper, *Epinephelus striatus*, South Andros Island, Bahamas (left)



Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)  
 pregnant fish caught in traps by Tinker Roark  
 South Andros, Bahamas.

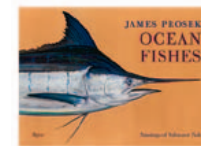


EXHIBIT & BOOK  
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See for yourself. For exhibit dates and locations, plus information on James Prosek's *Ocean Fishes* (available October 2012), visit [jamesprosek.com](http://jamesprosek.com).

**“My intent is to paint** these monumental creatures and exhibit them so that people who don’t get to have that privileged view that the fisherman does—of seeing a large pelagic fish alive—can at least get some sense of its size and beauty. In a way, the paintings are a quiet conservation statement, just showing the fish, many of which we are rapidly losing from our oceans.”

**COLOR THEORY:** Prosek paints with watercolors—some more gouache, others more acrylic—applied with sable-hair brushes.

