

# Animal Magnetism

*James Prosek trekked to one of the most remote places in the Western Hemisphere to create art in the name of science*

*James Prosek: Suriname, on view through June 24 at the Whitney Humanities Center, 53 Wall St., New Haven. Open 3-5 p.m. Mon. & Wed. or by appointment. 203-432-0670, yale.edu/whc.*

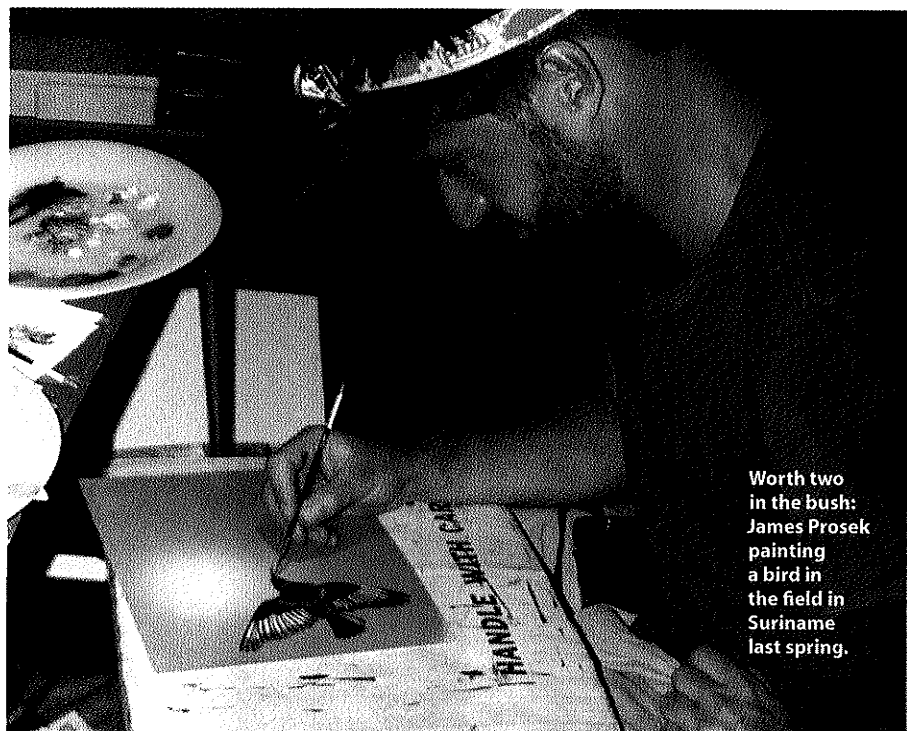
BY NANCY BURTON

A joyous partnership of art and science, atop an unnamed mountain in a tropical jungle in South America where no human had ever walked before, advanced both last spring. Now, some of the fruits of that unusual enterprise are on public display in the Elm City.

The exhibit *James Prosek: Suriname* is at Yale's Whitney Center for the Humanities through June 24. It opened on February 28.

The exhibit features watercolors of birds, vipers, moths and flowers, some painted on the mountain and some back in Prosek's Connecticut studio, and a selection of white, gray and brilliantly feathered stuffed songbirds captured in the name of science.

The 35-year-old Prosek, the versatile artist-author best known for publishing his first illustrated book about trout fishing in 1996 while still an undergraduate at Yale, paired up with Kristof Zyskowski, ornithologist and manager of vertebrate collections for Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History, for the three-week adventure of a lifetime last March and April.



Worth two in the bush: James Prosek painting a bird in the field in Suriname last spring.

They were joined by Bernd Heinrich, the University of Vermont biologist, best-selling author and record-breaking runner, Mei Chin, a chef and food critic with an academic interest in foods of indigenous people, and two locals, a game warden and trail-cutter.

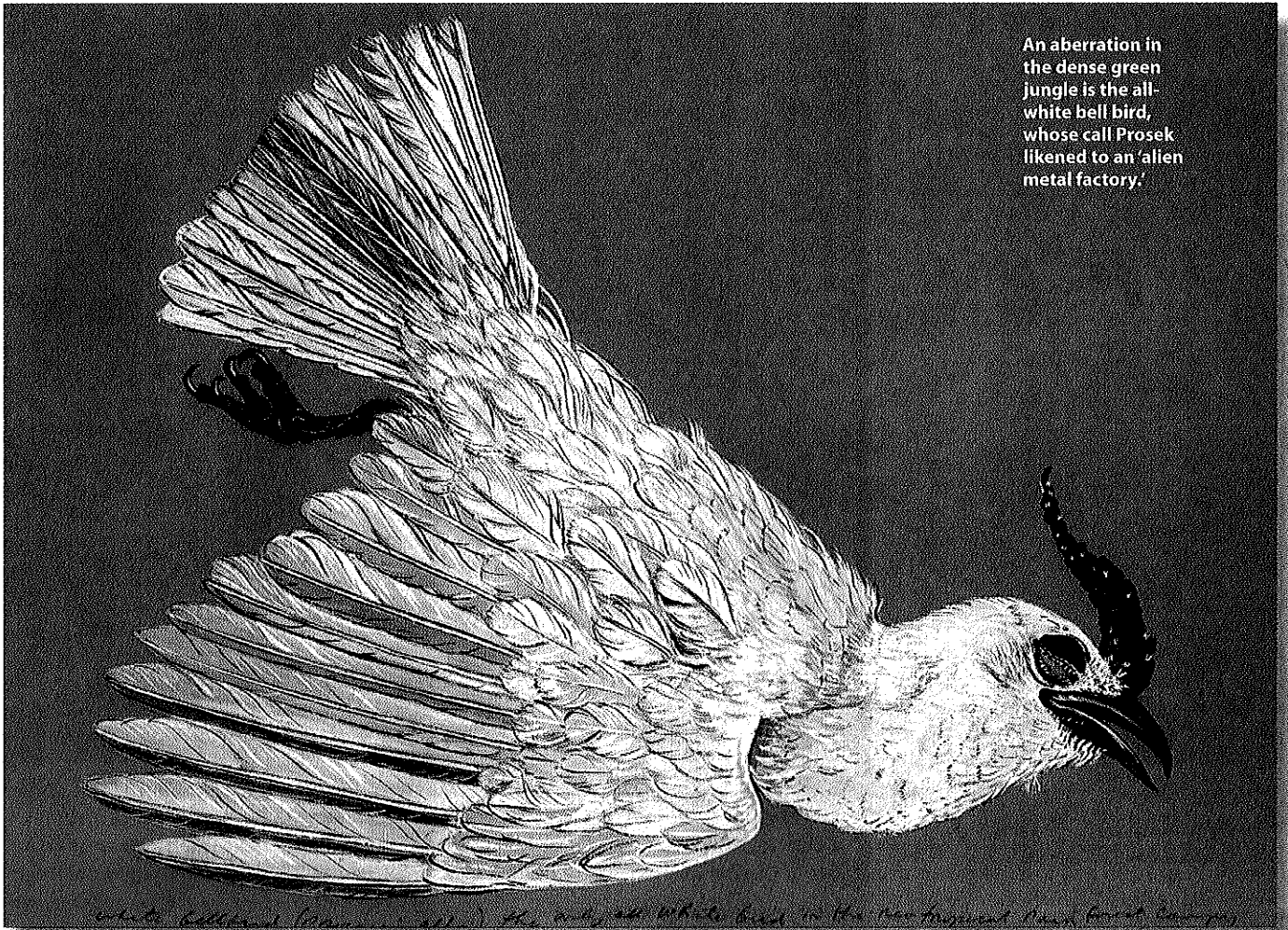
Their mission was to collect new bird and nest specimens for the Peabody's renowned bird collection from the Wilhelmina Mountains in southwest Suriname (formerly Dutch Guyana), the remote World Heritage site they reached by chartered helicopter.

The expedition was one of dozens Yale may sponsor at any given time on any

continent for the Peabody, which houses one of the world's pre-eminent collections of plants and animals. Its bird collection alone has 130,000 specimens, preserved to provide knowledge critical to species protection and the advancement of environmental science.

The trip to Suriname was Zyskowski's 20<sup>th</sup> expedition for the Peabody, but Prosek's first. Their historic mission achieved its goals: the adventurers discovered a new species of bird (as well as several subspecies and nests) and added to knowledge of birds native to Suriname.

An aberration in the dense green jungle is the all-white bell bird, whose call Prosek likened to an 'alien metal factory.'



From a makeshift camp set up last March at an elevation near 4,000 feet, they set nets to snare the unsuspecting birds. For high-canopy dwellers, a 12-gauge shotgun using fine powder was the preferred method of harvesting the avians, as it was for John James Audubon on the American frontier 200 years earlier. The birds fell into the dense underbrush riddled with holes too tiny to see, except for the big-beaked birds.

The 200 birds retrieved from their jungle habitat now repose at the Peabody in temperature-controlled, permanent slumber inside metal drawers with identifying tags tied to their legs, available to be studied by scholars. Samples of their internal organs are stored in glass tubes for DNA research and whatever research technology the future holds.

The Whitney exhibit provides a window into a hitherto unknown slice of a pristine natural world as seen through Prosek's eyes. (In April, Zyskowski will publish the expedition's formal findings in the *Bulletin of the Peabody Museum of Natural History*.)

Prosek's watercolors are delicately executed with quick, deliberate strokes by the left-handed artist, who happened

to paint a white orchid on the single day it bloomed. Unlike fish, which lose their coloration when removed from the water, the birds' iridescent plumage stays forever brilliant.

Prosek would be the first to say that what you see through his eyes will be a distortion, even if he doesn't intend it. "Whenever we photograph or paint nature, we distort nature in some way," he says.

To underscore the point, he deliberately introduced distortion in several of the pictures, giving flowers and insects a tilt and flipping a snake upside-down, spiraling it in the air and flattening it so it appears squished.

You might say Prosek belongs to a subspecies of human known as "originals."

He manifested artistic precocity from an early age when he created his own Peter Rabbit book, borrowing the text from Beatrix Potter's classic nursery tale and boldly substituting his own illustrations.



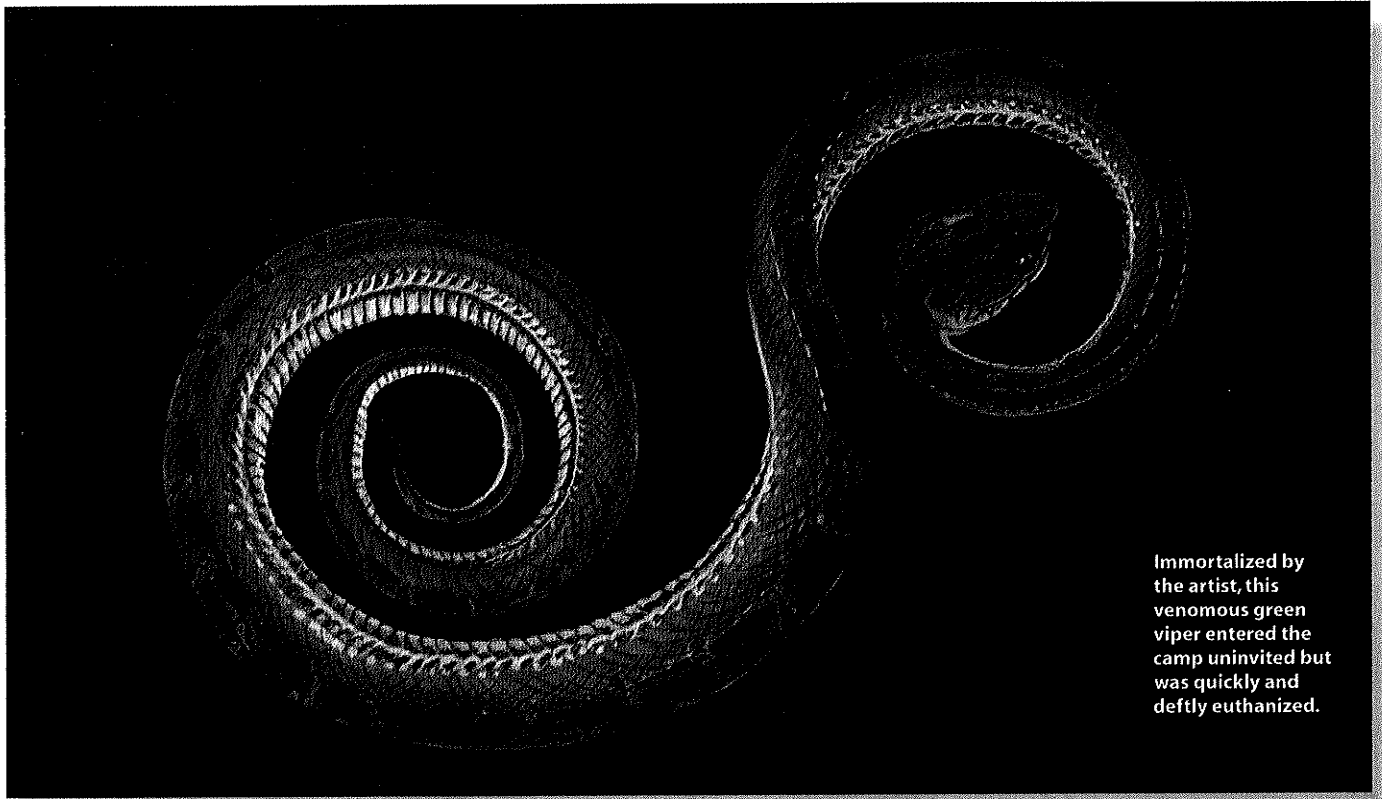
The Whitney exhibition marks Prosek's artistic return to birds, which he began

sketching from age four during family forays into the woods near his home in Easton. He assembled bird books and his father, an astronomy teacher at a local school, would bring home library books featuring the nature art of Audubon, Louis Agassiz and Albrecht Durer to channel his son's artistic development.

At nine, Prosek's interests turned to fishing for trout in the streams and reservoir near his house. When he looked for an illustrated book about trout to guide his artistic drive to sketch and paint them, he couldn't find one. By age 11, he was at work to fill that void on what would become his first published book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*.

In September, he published *Eels*, his tenth book, which combines original illustration, natural history, travel writing and investigative journalism, with some anthropology as well, to popularize a mysterious but collapsing species of fish considered sacred gods by indigenous populations in Polynesia and delectable by millions of Japanese.

Prosek has courted risk in pursuit of nature as he has traveled widely to remote locations. Published in 2003, *Fly-Fishing the*



Immortalized by the artist, this venomous green viper entered the camp uninvited but was quickly and deftly euthanized.

41<sup>st</sup> is an account of his two-year odyssey following the 41<sup>st</sup> parallel from Easton, around the world, and back. His drive past skirmishing Turks and Kurds to reach the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in the company of an experienced Austrian trout expert as his guide, was notably harrowing.

Prosek, the artist, and Zyskowski, the scientist, planned the trip to Suriname after getting to know one another through Peabody activities. Prosek's association with the Peabody began as a child when he gravitated to its third-floor Hall of Birds to hone his powers of observation and precocious drawing skills. He volunteered there while a Yale undergraduate and now serves as a curatorial affiliate. The two have much in common beyond their tall frames, modesty and good humor.

Prosek, whose parents are of Czech origin, grew up in Easton, a Fairfield County town lush with woods, streams and protected watershed property.

Zyskowski was born in eastern Poland in a town about the size of Easton, also located in a greenbelt, a district rich in natural landscape.

Both have an affinity for music. Prosek was singer/songwriter/guitarist for his coffeehouse band, Troutband, while at Yale. Zyskowski is a bird-song aficionado who can distinguish more than 600 varieties of trills and tweets.

Both have a fondness for architecture. Prosek considered studying to become an architect. Zyskowski's academic expertise lies in the architecture of bird nests.

And both have thrilled to outdoor adventure and physical risk since as long as they can remember. The unnamed mountain in Suriname, with all its challenges, summoned like a siren song.

Still, nothing quite prepared them for the helicopter ride from Paramaribo, Suriname's capital, to the unnamed mountaintop where the Peabody expedition would spend three weeks of intense activity from sunrise to midnight collecting birds and other specimens and preparing them for eternal preservation.

The journey to the jungle interior was so distant that the helicopter had to land at a midway point to refuel, then await clear weather to complete the journey. The expedition was planned a year in advance to occur during the rainy season, the birds' breeding season, when the sought-after birds could be identified by their breeding songs. The helicopter resumed its flight into clear skies but beyond the halfway point, thick fog rolled in to obscure the view.

The low-flying helicopter lacked an altimeter, which would inform the pilot how close the craft was at a given time above the rugged mountainous terrain.

The land below was unmapped, densely wooded and hostile to helicopters.

But Zyskowski, the seasoned leader of the expedition who had made three previous expeditions to less remote parts of Suriname, knew of a certain granite ledge likely suitable for a helicopter touch-down. As the chopper circled with a depleting fuel reserve, and his fellow expeditioners convulsed in airsickness and sweat, he guided them confidently to the needle in the haystack.

As they waved the helicopter goodbye, he adventurers consoled themselves that they had brought along a satellite phone. They were miles from the nearest known indigenous people and the mountain's nearly vertical slope rendered it inaccessible to foot travel.

Torrential rains soon drowned the small camp they constructed from trees they felled. They dug trenches around their tents to divert the deluge, but they got soaked in their sleeping bags anyway.

Despite heightened precautions, the satellite phone too was a casualty of the flooding.

Yet a year later, Prosek waxes exuberant about the experience.

"I loved being in an unnamed and untouched place," says Prosek, whose boyish, understated manner and easy charm belie a formidable self-discipline.

He fell asleep to the lullabies of frogs and awoke to a symphony of urgent bird calls in the natural surround-sound system.

Of all the birds he helped capture, gut and stuff (not processes anyone enjoys, he acknowledges) and paint (and, yes, eat — lest their meat go to waste), the bell bird stands out.

"It's all-white, an aberration in the green jungle, and its call is like an alien metal factory," Prosek explains. He painted its fluff-feathered likeness on tea-stained paper to accentuate its whiteness. It's one of the birds on loan from the Peabody to the exhibition.

In the virgin jungle, Prosek wielded a machete and taxidermy instruments as well as his paintbrush, often into the night wearing a head lantern.

As he painted a likeness of the poisonous green viper that had entered the camp uninvited (soon euthanized by Zyskowski with a daring jab of Nembutol behind its neck), Prosek entered the ideal state espoused by a personal hero, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Izaak Walton, troutsmán and author of the lyrical ode to the contemplative life, *The Compleat Angler*.

That is, Prosek had entered the zone of contentment, simplicity and quietude that he aspires to.

All the while, his academic side contemplated how art distorts nature, how

newly discovered species are named and how all living things are categorized under the system developed centuries years ago by the Dutch botanist Carl Linnaeus.

Back at home, grounded in "this world," one of Prosek's current projects is writing a book addressing such topics.

"Nature's by nature too chaotic" to fit into a linear classification system, he says. "We do need some kind of order, but nature's fluidity can betray our instincts to put it in a box."

In conjunction with the Whitney exhibit, Prosek has organized an academic roundtable panel of leading experts to discuss initiatives to update the creationist-oriented Linnaeus system of biological classifications to a more evolutionary-oriented approach. On April 15, the experts from Yale and the Smithsonian will meet from 2 to 3 p.m. at the Whitney Humanities Center on Wall Street.

To stimulate their thinking, the panelists will be introduced to feathered creatures through an artist's eyes as well as the nameless grey-feathered bird first captured on the slopes of Unnamed Mountain in Suriname by the Zyskowski-Prosek Expedition of 2010.