

The artist and writer outside his backyard retreat, surrounded by nature, in Fairfield

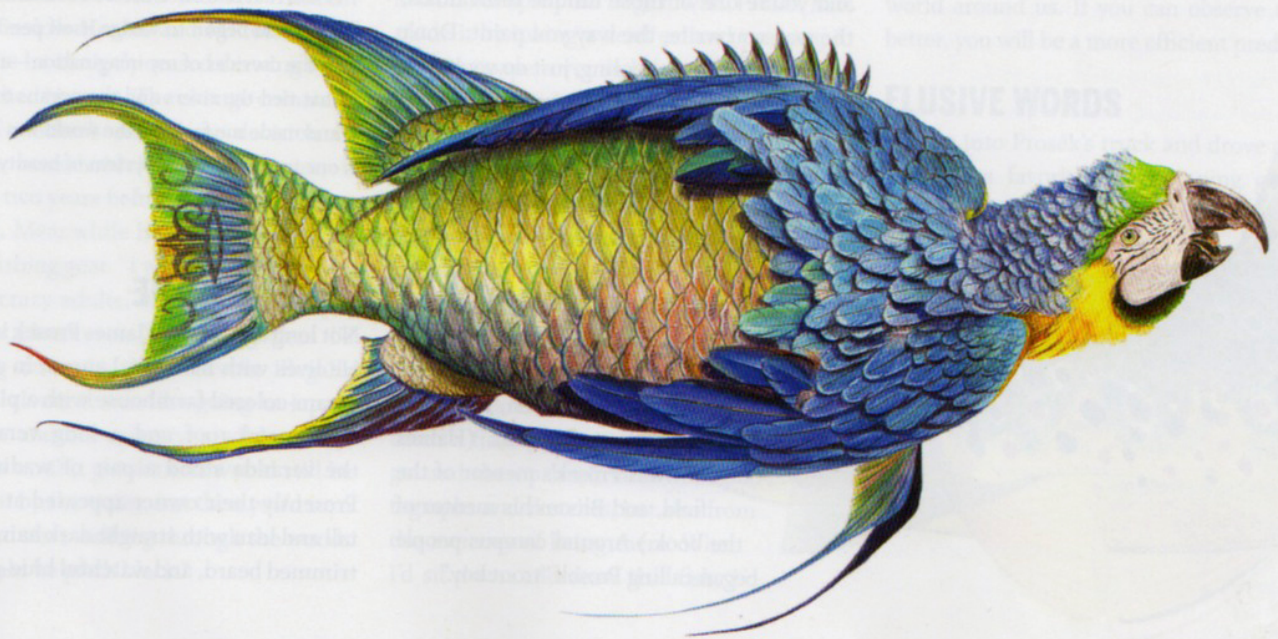




BY **TIM DUMAS** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BRIAN SAMUELS** • ILLUSTRATIONS BY **JAMES PROSEK**

PROSEK COUNTRY

WALKING OFF THE BEATEN PATH WITH WRITER AND ARTIST
JAMES PROSEK, THE "TRANSCENDENTAL DETECTIVE"



JAMES PROSEK IS A PAINTER AND WRITER WHOSE OBSESSIVE SUBJECT HAS BEEN FISH.

On the publication of his first book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*, in 1996, critics hailed James Prosek as an aquatic Audubon, an artist whose iridescent watercolors seemed so shiny and wet that they were liable to flop off the page and into your lap.

His sentences unfolded with clarity and grace. “The instructive nature of the trout stream is not forced upon its visitors, but held candidly by the water and the trees,” he begins, and you can’t help following him from stream to stream even if you have no inherent fascination with the pursuit of a fish. The writing has only deepened with each book. Among his diverse fans are Tom Brokaw, George H.W. Bush, Jann Wenner (whose Idaho escape is adorned with original Proseks), and the literary critic Harold Bloom, his old Shakespeare professor at Yale.

“He came to me at the beginning of his senior year and he said he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do,” Bloom recalled during an interview at his house in New Haven. “Various relatives and friends were saying he ought to go to architecture school. I was rather surprised, because I’d read so much by him and seen so many pictures. I asked, ‘Why, James?’ He said, ‘Well, to earn a living.’ I said, ‘James, occasionally somebody will come along with talent so individual—but also with a touch of the popular in them—and you’re one of those unique individuals, the way you write, the way you paint. Don’t go to any further schooling, just do your own writing and painting.’ And it worked out.”

Unlike John James Audubon, who hit stride in middle age, Prosek was a wunderkind. *Trout* appeared when he was only twenty years old and a junior at Yale. His second book, *Joe and Me*, a memoir of his friendship with the game warden Joe Haines, who caught him fishing illegally in the Aspetuck Reservoir at age fifteen, came out his senior year. (Haines was Prosek’s mentor of the field, and Bloom his mentor of the book.) Around campus people began calling Prosek “trout boy.”

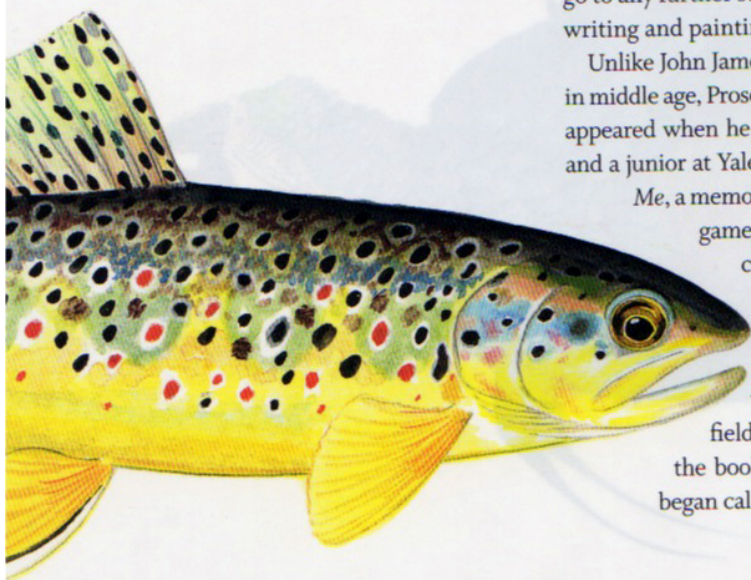
For his senior paper, he cadged a fellowship to study in Great Britain. Well, to fish there. The idea was to cast his line in the streams favored by Izaak Walton, whose seventeenth-century classic *The Compleat Angler* is the most reprinted book in English after the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. But Prosek did not stop at writing a paper. His wanderings down British rivers with storybook names like Dove and Wye became his own *Complete Angler: A Connecticut Yankee Follows in the Footsteps of Walton* (1999). “I felt like Alice must have felt in Wonderland,” he wrote. “I was in this strange and beautiful world where everyone was mad, completely batty, except me.”

Next Prosek wrote and illustrated books about fly-fishing, trout of the world, ocean fishes and eels. The latter book, *Eels* (2010), contains much of his best writing as he pursues, like a transcendental detective, “the world’s most mysterious fish.” Some cultures (Japan) eat eels like hot dogs, while other cultures (the Maori) view them as sacred and claim to witness them climbing trees and walking down streets. Prosek himself once tried to keep eels in a tank, but so powerful was their drive to migrate that they escaped or died trying. Contemplating the eel’s curious life cycle—it alone spends its adult life in freshwater and returns to the middle of the ocean to spawn—Prosek wrote:

A fish that had once been an accident on my hook had begun to wedge itself persistently in the crevices of my imagination—a thread that tied the rivers and the oceans together and made me feel like the world was held by one interconnected system of beauty, magic and mystery.

HEADING HOME

Not long ago I visited James Prosek in Easton. He lives with his wife, Lauren, in a pristine cream-colored farmhouse with a plantation-style metal roof and a long veranda. On the veranda stood a pair of wading boots. Presently their owner appeared at the door, tall and lean with straight dark hair, a closely trimmed beard, and watchful blue-gray eyes.



"I've lived my whole life on this street," Prosek, who is thirty-nine, told me. "I grew up in that ranch house two doors down." This little corner of the world holds a spell over him; it's clear that no matter where he goes—he's traveled the world in search of the rare and the beautiful—emotional gravity will always pull him right back here. "There have been times when I've been away half the year, or even more," he said. "But I've always enjoyed coming back—not only to this town, but to this street. Being here is a big part of my work, my process"—that is, his transcription of experience into art.

His street dead-ends at an old dairy barn. Beyond the barn lies a pine forest veined with little rivers and beyond the pine forest stretches the darkly glittering waters of the Easton Reservoir. He looked across an open meadow to the woods. "I think I was as in tune with the environment of these local streams as anybody possibly could be. I was drawing these trout, I was living by these streams, I was dreaming about them at night."

His father, raised in coastal Brazil, has a passion for birds, and so it was with birds that James began. From the age of five, in the house up the street where his father still lives, he spent hours at the kitchen table with his colored pencils, copying bird paintings from Audubon's *Birds of America* and Louis Agassiz Fuertes's *Singular Beauty of Birds*. (Later influences would include Albrecht Dürer, Winslow Homer and Milton Avery.) At age nine he abruptly ceased drawing birds and switched to trout. The change coincided with his mother's shattering decision to leave the household for another man; it would be two years before James set eyes on her again. Meanwhile he took to the woods with his fishing gear. "I wanted to escape the world of crazy adults," he said. His escapes were also adventures. "As a kid, when I'd go fishing down in the reservoir, illegally and often alone, it was like going to Japan. It was like another country, a wilderness. I would fish until it got dark. It would still be pretty light by the water, but then you'd turn around and start walking through the woods and it would be pitch black."



As a boy, James seemed to live by his own rules. Later Harold Bloom would notice a corresponding artistic self-rule. "James is one of those people who in some sense fathered and mothered himself," he said. "He's an exemplary image of a kind of freedom."

James caught his first trout in a stream near the reservoir. The speckled beauty of his native brook trout enthralled him; later he'd say that of the creatures in nature only the human woman surpassed it. From ages ten to twenty-eight, Prosek's life revolved around fishing for trout, painting trout and meditating on trout.

We were sitting in the loft-like studio above his detached garage. A huge painting of an eel swarm occupied the largest wall. Prosek had made it by inking a dead eel and pressing it onto the paper over and over again, until the great swarm pulsed with a wild dark energy. Elsewhere around the room there was bird art: Prosek was painting birds again, ducks, peacocks, parakeets, and these works were ravishing—even better, I thought, than his fish paintings.

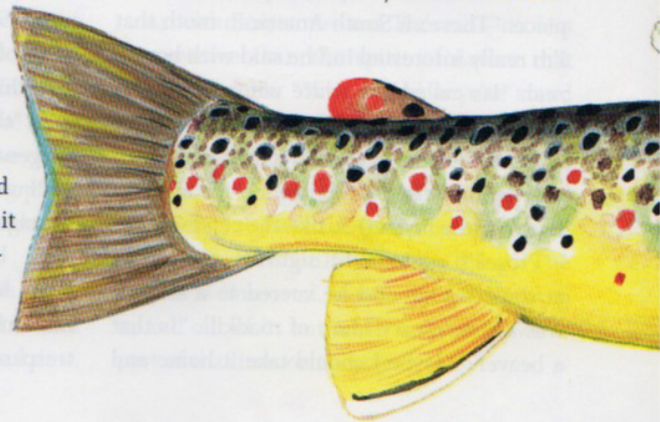
"After many years drawing hundreds of trout I started wondering. Why do I do this? What's the point? I'd catch a fish, take a picture of it, let it go, and then paint it later from photographs and sketches, but also from the memory of being there. When I'd sit down and draw that fish, I

would relive the entire experience of catching it really vividly. It was a way of internalizing the experience of being with that creature."

Prosek thinks of himself as a predator. He was talking not about his personality, but about a deep genetic itch in the brain. As a dog tramples down its invisible bed of grass on the living room floor, so "today we catch fish and let them go. Totally absurd! But people have this predatory instinct still in them. Most of the things we do come out of centuries of predation and gathering. Drawing, for instance. Drawing wouldn't still exist if it didn't have some kind of evolutionary value. That's my belief. I think it makes us more accurate observers of the world around us. If you can observe things better, you will be a more efficient predator."

ELUSIVE WORDS

We got into Prosek's truck and drove across town to a favorite old stomping ground, the Trout Brook Valley Conservation



Area. On the way, I asked him about his literary influences. They range from John Milton (in college Prosek re-wrote *Paradise Lost* with a Manhattan setting) to modern masters identified strongly with the natural world: Hemingway, Bruce Chatwin and Peter Matthiessen, author of *The Snow Leopard* and a friend of Prosek's. He had recently died. "Actually, I was supposed to have left yesterday with him on a fishing trip to Belize. I was really looking forward to that." He frowns. "We were going to fish for permit"—I stared at him blankly—"which is a fish that's really coveted by fly fishermen."

This summer Prosek is working on a book about how we name and thus order the natural world, a practice that began, in our mythology, with Adam. What interests him chiefly is how naming things tricks us into believing the natural world is fixed into place—a brown trout is a brown trout—when in truth it's slippery: the brown trout varies from stream to stream. "As Darwin laid it out," Prosek said, "nature is this fluid, constantly changing thing." We all came from the sea and have been in a state of perpetual creation ever since. Intriguingly, primitive societies often understand this better than we do, even if their science is a little off. "In Pohnpei, Micronesia, a coconut tree can grow from an eel's head, and then a bird eats the coconut seed and flies to another island, and something else hatches."

After the naming book, Prosek thinks he'll concentrate on poetry and fiction (he has already written a sweet but wrenching autobiographical novel for young adults called *The Day My Mother Left*). To satisfy his wanderlust, he'll also do the odd travel piece. "There's a South American moth that I'm really interested in," he said with boyish zeal. "It's called the white witch moth and it has the largest wingspan of any moth or butterfly—up to a foot. But no one's been able to find the caterpillar. So it's another one of these mysteries, like the eels."

Prosek's eye caught sight of something at the roadside and he veered to a stop. It was a giant, furry lump of roadkill. "Is that a beaver? Maybe I should take it home and

stuff it." Prosek is pushing his art to strange new places. Some observers had thought him a strict realist—but a close look at even his early fish paintings reveals abstract squiggles and blots that covertly enliven the naturalistic forms. Now he was creating bizarre hybrid creatures: a taxidermied red fox with the wings of a sea duck, for instance. To make "Flying Fox with Lady's Slippers" Prosek stretched the fox skin (a neighbor had found the animal dead in a field) around a foam body and then pressed the duck's humerus bones into it. Curled up in a peaceful sleep, the fox looks like something out of a dream of heaven. (Prosek's painted version of the same subject, "Flying Fox with Prussian Firearm," in which the fox takes flight on a pair of crow's wings, is among his finest pieces.)

Some find these works are disturbing in the manner of the Beast Folk stitched together by the mad doctor in H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. But Prosek's hybrids are meant to suggest humans' imaginative congress with nature. After all, what is a mermaid? A pegasus? "To the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself," wrote William Blake. The hybrids shake up our sense of natural order, guide us from fixity to fluidity. Alas, the beaver would remain a beaver. Turning it over with his shoe, Prosek said, "It's just too far gone to salvage."

NATURE RULES

At Trout Brook Valley, we met David Brant, the buoyant executive director of the Aspetuck Land Trust, which acquired most of the 1,009-acre tract of forest and field in 1999. Brant said Trout Brook lies at the heart of 6,400 acres of connected woodland, including Devil's Den in Weston, a belt he calls "the lungs of Fairfield County" for its oxygenating properties.

"I used to poach here before it was open to the public," Prosek said of his pre-Joe Haines days. Haines did his best to encourage strict legality, but to James off-limits land remained an enticement: "I never let a 'no trespassing' sign stop me."

We set off down the trail. For me, hiking in the woods with James Prosek was like hitting tennis balls with Rafael Nadal or cooking a meal with Anthony Bourdain: I was tagging along with a world-class observer of nature, trying to pick up a little knowledge.

"These wildflowers, these are red trillium. The deer usually munch them, but that's a really nice patch," Prosek said. "The thing with those red trillium, they smell like rotting flesh." Another name for them is Stinking Benjamin. Prosek knelt down and offered his nose. "Ewk. Smells more like a bad sock."

Brant and I followed his easy gait to an earthen bridge over Hawley's Brook. This winding little stream is among the state's best spawning grounds for brook trout, but at the moment there were only shadows and ghosts of shadows. "Listen to that brook gurgling," Prosek said. "I feel my predatory instinct kicking in. Should have brought a rod."

There was a bright flash in the trees: a yellow-throated warbler. Then a few steps up the trail, a black-and-white warbler. "A lot of warblers!" Prosek brandished his iPhone and found a warbler call—a high, thin, energetic song. Curious, the dramatically striped bird danced a circle around us, flitting from limb to limb, before rejecting the iPhone as a suitable mate.

"Ah! Lady's slippers," Prosek said. "It's a beautiful pink orchid. Did you know there's more diversity of orchids in New England than there is in like, Hawaii? A lot of them are really tiny flowers, really subtle." The lady's slipper, which often appears in Prosek's work, is endangered in many states, but not yet in Connecticut. "I don't know any place in Easton where I've seen a lot of them except for here, along this path."

An owl hooted in the distance. A domestic dog barked, and a coyote answered back.

Brant grumbled about phragmites, pointing to some tall, feathery-topped stuff that I thought looked pretty, swaying in the breeze, but apparently is the femme fatale of grasses. "It's an invasive reed that grows up to fifteen feet tall and just kind of takes over everything," Brant said. "We're having it removed."

"Look. Those are wild leeks—\$18 a pound at Whole Foods," said Prosek. "The bulbs are really good to eat. I made leek pesto last week. I just grind them up, leaves, too, with pine nuts. I parboil half of the leeks, just for a second, and then I put half raw, half cooked ones in with pine nuts and parmesan."

Oblivious of rules, he pulled two leeks out of the ground and handed them to me.

"Uh-oh," said Brant.

Trout Brook Valley has a famous orchard with a thousand blueberry bushes where land trust members (\$35 for individuals, \$50 for families) can pick fruit. But here on the trails "plant removal" is strictly prohibited.

The leek bulbs were covered in rich black muddy soil. What was I supposed to do with them? I was setting them down on a sunny rock when Prosek turned and said, "No, those are good to eat."

I brushed away as much mud as I could and popped them into my mouth. I did not regret it: They tasted like sweet, delicate scallions.

"This is kind of cool," said Prosek, pointing to a couple of enormous felled trees awash in sunlight. "These big trees came down in a storm, but look at all the little hemlocks coming up." The dead trees had opened a hole in the woods, allowing for regeneration—many born where two had died.

We came to a pit of muck. While Prosek and Brant took a keen interest in it, I scratched my head. "This is a vernal pool," Brant explained. "We have over sixty vernal pools where amphibians live, spotted salamanders, frogs. Amphibians form the foundation of the forest food chain. All the other little critters in the forest eat the amphibians. If they're not healthy, everything else is affected."

"Does it have a name, this pool?" Prosek asked, perhaps as research, to see what significance had been accorded it.

"The James Prosek Vernal Pool," Brant replied.

Prosek went on drawing my attention to lively things. "This is a stand of blue cohosh, another wildflower. They have beautiful bluish berries....This is a jack-in-the-pulpit. That's a really pretty one, because it's very



dark-lined....There's bloodroot....There's trout lily...."

For Prosek, nature's treasure box sat wide open; I, on the other hand, had noticed none of the colorful trinkets scattered at our feet. The predator-gatherer smiled sympathetically. "Everything just looks like a green blob until you know what it is."

What I did notice was a golf ball. The three of us stared at it through the purling waters of Hawley's Brook. The ball was bravely trying to migrate from the nearby Connecticut Golf Club all the way to Longshore, down by the Sound.

"Trout Brook Valley would have been a golf course, too, if folks hadn't saved it in 1999," Brant remarked. "This all would have been a golf course and a bunch of luxury homes."

In the late nineties the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company agreed to sell Trout Brook to National Fairways, a company that specializes in developing golf course-centered gated communities. It appeared the deal would proceed as planned, but the tide turned when Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward joined in, donating \$500,000 toward the \$5.3 million needed to save Trout Brook Valley. (The state kicked in the other \$6 million of the \$11.3 million asking price. Meanwhile, the Town of Weston bought the forty-five acres within its borders.)

"This was a huge battle, getting this land," Prosek added. "Sometimes the good battles are won." He gave a short laugh. "You know,



I was approached by the developer. They wanted to pay me to paint a trout for every golf hole. It was a very short conversation."

Prosek jumped down off the path and watched his elongated shadow glide across the sandy bottom of the brook. The shadow would scare away any trout in the vicinity, he said. "If you just walk up the stream like this, they're going to disappear. You won't see them. They'll hide under rocks or under the stream bank. But if you can sneak up on a trout and actually watch them feeding or clearing a place for their eggs, then you know you've really melted into the landscape."

Prosek had spent much of his life melting into the landscape. These days he's more apt to melt into creations of his own, his writing and his art, but watching him by this woodland stream, it was easy to think of him in light of his cosmic-minded forerunner Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Nature is the symbol of spirit," Emerson wrote. "In the woods...I am part or particle of God."

As with Emerson—and Thoreau—it's less the science than the spirit of nature that absorbs Prosek. "Why would anyone stand in a river for three or four hours?" he asked with a shrug. "Language sometimes fails to explain things. But it's a very spiritual experience to have the river flowing around you—this constantly flowing thing. The stream is immortal, it never stops. We step in and out of it, but when we're in it, we're part of that immortal cycle." »



Writer and artist Mabel Osgood Wright founded the Connecticut Audubon Society and, with friend Annie Burr Jennings, Birdcraft, a bird sanctuary in their hometown of Fairfield

MABEL OSGOOD WRIGHT

A Naturalist Pioneer

James Prosek owes some portion of his life as a naturalist, writer and artist to the long-gone and largely forgotten “bird lady” of Fairfield, Mabel Osgood Wright.

Herself a naturalist, writer and photographic artist, Wright helped set off a nature book boom in 1894 with the publication of *The Friendship of Nature: A New England Chronicle of Birds and Flowers*. It was a surprise bestseller. The *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* found “much of the feeling of Henry D. Thoreau between the covers of this book” and *The Dial* declared Wright “a true poet in the Emersonian sense, namely, in the power to

see the miraculous in the common.” What John Muir was to the Western mountains, Wright was to the pastoral landscapes of New England—gardens, meadows and woodlands.

In 1895 Wright published the even more popular *Birdcraft: A Field Book of Two Hundred Song, Game, and Water Birds*. It would remain the standard reference guide for forty years.

One might imagine that nature books written in the late Victorian age would be fatally obsolete today. But her writing still sings. One could call out almost any sentence for its exemplary brightness and precision.

Here she is on trees: “Beyond the meadow a heavy belt of maples marks the course of the river; the gray, misty hue of winter has gone from their tops and they are flushed with red; the willows are yellow, and here and there show signs of leaf, but the white birches loom grim and chilling....” A coterie of naturalist-writers has kept her work alive. One of them, Daniel J. Philippon, selected *The Friendship of Nature* for republication in 1999, deeming it a “lost classic.”

Born in Greenwich Village in 1859 to the Unitarian minister Samuel Osgood and his wife, Ellen, Mabel Gray Osgood was raised

among a cultured set. A clumsy young Teddy Roosevelt kicked her ankles at ballroom dance classes. Her father's circle included William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and J.P. Morgan. Before Mabel's birth, Osgood bought land in Fairfield, just north of the train depot on Unquowa Road, and built an eighteen-room summer house there. He christened the estate "Waldstein"—forest of stones—but renamed it "Mosswood" after transforming the rough ground into a garden paradise. It was Osgood who taught Mabel to (as she put it) "see the love of God through nature." For the rest of her life she explored the wilds of Fairfield, Easton, Weston and Redding, often hauling along her large-format camera and heavy glass plates in a horse-drawn buggy. (Wright's photographs illustrate *The Friendship of Nature* and *Flowers and Ferns in Their Haunts*.)

Wright was a buxom woman with iron-gray hair and a stern gaze—a gaze hinting at the determination with which she attacked environmental wrongs. One issue that drew her wrath was the slaughter of birds for the millinery industry. In Victorian times women wore hats bedecked with bird feathers, wings, heads and sometimes whole stuffed carcasses. Plume hunters wiped out colonies of terns, herons and waxwings, and drove the prized snowy egret to the brink of extinction. So, one stormy night in the winter of 1898, Wright gathered twelve women at the home of Helen Glover in Fairfield and founded the Connecticut Audubon Society—only the fourth such society in the country. Wright was elected president and served for twenty-six years. Her preservation efforts, however, did not extend to all birds. "This is another bird you may hunt from your woods...and destroy with poisoned grain," she wrote of the hapless crow. "He is a cannibal, devouring both the eggs and young of insect-destroying songbirds."

In 1914, she and her friend Annie Burr Jennings hit upon the idea of creating a bird sanctuary in Fairfield. Jennings, a Standard Oil heiress, bought a ten-acre parcel that



One reason James Prosek's father moved to Easton was proximity to the bird sanctuary in Fairfield. Along with the Audubon Center, James (above as a boy) often visited when he was growing up.

Wright had selected—right across the street from Mosswood—upon which she designed a songbird "oasis in a desert of material things." The Connecticut Audubon Society called it "Birdcraft" in her honor. "Ten acres cannot harbor many birds," wrote her friend the ornithologist Frank Chapman, "but the idea which they embody can reach to the ends of the earth."

Birdcraft Sanctuary and Museum brings us back to James Prosek. One reason why Prosek's bird-loving father, Louis, settled in Easton was to be near the bird sanctuary in Fairfield. (Prosek often visited Birdcraft and the Audubon Center on Burr Street.) Easton, in turn, introduced James to his own original nature passion, the trout. There's a second Wright-Prosek connection. Her charming 1897 novel *Citizen Bird*—designed to teach the young to revere nature—was illustrated by an untested young artist named Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Fuertes would go on to become a master of the nature illustration genre and, with John James Audubon, a

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—FRANK CHAPMAN ON BIRDCRAFT SANCTUARY

prime influence on Prosek's artwork.

The death in 1920 of Wright's beloved husband, rare book dealer James Osborne Wright, drove her into semi-seclusion; she "turned more and more toward the paths she had trodden in her younger days," wrote John Holman, her successor as president of the Connecticut Audubon Society. "No one knew the older Fairfield better than she."

Wright died of heart trouble in 1934, aged seventy-five. No doubt she would be saddened to see condominiums where Mosswood once stood and I-95 running through the northern half of Birdcraft. On the other hand, Birdcraft, in its centennial year, is the oldest bird sanctuary in the country and a National Historic Landmark. At present the Audubon Society is renovating the Adirondack-style museum building—a multimillion-dollar project—and partnering with the Sasqua Garden Club of Southport to rejuvenate the gardens and grounds. Birdcraft will be a tiny paradise regained. **F**

SAVE
THE
DATE

July 3 to September 16

The Fairfield Museum and History Center is putting on an exhibit called "Picturing Fairfield: The Photographs of Mabel Osgood Wright." It seems that Wright is a perennial after all.