

Zoë Ward, center, presides over a district children, Juliana and Alexander, and Ed

A Fair Bid to Become the Audubon of the Fishing World

By JAMES LOMUSCIO

DEIRDRE BAIR, a writer, refers to her Easton neighbor James O. Prosek as "the Roger Tory Peterson of trout." Like Mr. Peterson, an Old Lyme resident whose "Field Guide to the Birds" books have made him an authority, Mr. Prosek's passion for trout may soon earn him the moniker of leading expert.

"He's very dedicated, like so many people who are passionately involved with a subject," said Ms. Bair, the author of "Samuel Beckett: a Biography."

Joseph Haines, Mr. Prosek's fishing buddy, agreed: "He's a scientific fisherman, is what he is."

"He wants to study everything — their life cycle, their food chain, how they reproduce," said Mr. Haines, a ranger for the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company's lands. "He is also talking about crossbreeding trout."

Esoteric Streams and Brooks

Mr. Prosek, who fishes two to four days a week — even in the dead of winter — says he has caught and documented more than 1,000 trout (more than 5,000 fish, total) over the past nine years in Connecticut, other New England states and out West. Most of what he catches he photographs and releases. A small percentage he eats. Mr. Prosek has also mapped out esoteric streams and brooks throughout Connecticut, and

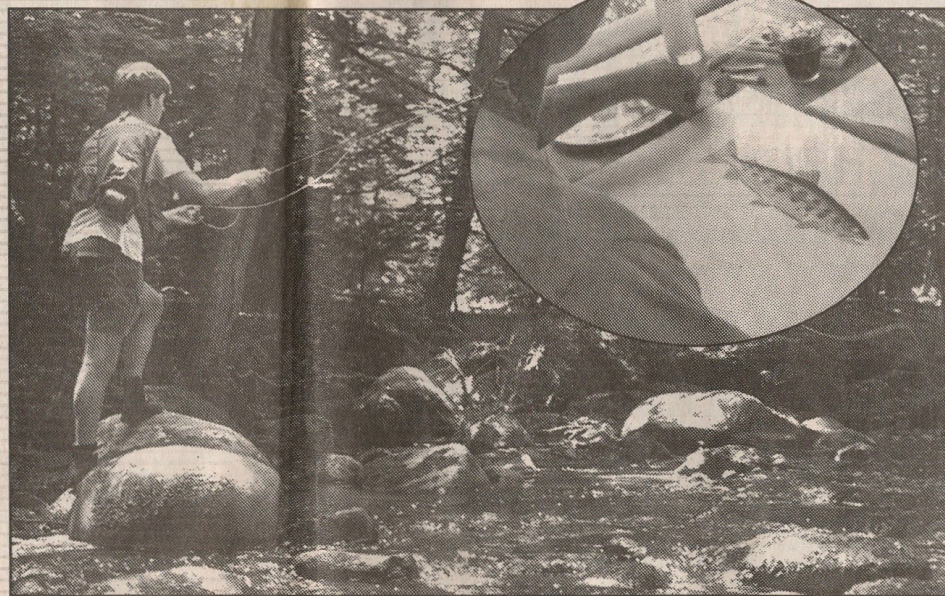
Art and text in hand, an expert seeks a publisher.

plans to lend his expertise to the state's Department of Environmental Protection's fisheries division. His book, "Celebration of the Trout: An Illustrated History," is in contract negotiations with a publisher. And Mr. Prosek is all of 19 years old.

"When you look at his illustrations and his proposal, you would have no idea that he is so young, because he's so talented and so knowledgeable," said Elaine Markson, head of the Markson Literary Agency in Manhattan. "He's the youngest person I've ever represented."

The 250-page book, she said, will include 70 full-color reproductions of Mr. Prosek's watercolor paintings choreographing the different species of trout (some of them now extinct) from Connecticut to California and from the Arctic Circle to central Mexico.

More than just a pastime, the subject of fishing consumes Mr. Prosek, a tall, somewhat shy and introspective young man who finds parallels in fishing to life in general. Fish were even the theme of the valedictory address. "The River of Life," he gave when he was graduated from Joel



Photographs by Helen Neafsey for The New York Times

James O. Prosek fishing in the Halfway River and (inset) painting a California golden trout.

Barlow High School in Redding last year.

When he is not engrossed in his studies at Yale University, where he

will enter his sophomore year this fall and has yet to declare a major, he fishes, ties flies, crafts trout wood carvings and writes in his fishing

journal, a diary he began in 1988 that is now in its eighth volume. Entries in the journal range from the matter-of-fact about the fish he has caught to

the philosophical. "The first fish I hooked was a wild brown of royal color who was picking the tube-shaped caddis off the rocks," he wrote on Nov. 28, 1992. "One difference between these fish and other wild browns were the elegant parr marks along the lateral lines."

An entry on Oct. 16, 1993 shows how trout fishing often becomes his philosophical springboard.

"As the final weeks close on another year, I find myself reluctant to end this book of memories," he wrote. "As I stare into the autumn leaves' reflection in the ponds and streams I've walked many times before, I get pangs of feeling, good and bad, that keep me returning to nature. My own reflection, in fact, is sealed in the waters of my home state dimpled by rains and frozen by snows, but nevertheless ever present."

In the Beginning, a Boy

Mr. Prosek's passion for fishing, he recalled, was forged when he was 10 years old and fishing illegally with a friend at the Easton Reservoir one spring day. Mr. Haines, a special state police officer whose beat is Bridgeport Hydraulic's watershed area, had been out in a boat and on the lookout for anglers, poachers and other lawbreakers.

"I was on the shore when he spotted us from the boat," Mr. Prosek recalled. "We dropped our poles and ran

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The Fishing World's Audubon

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into the woods.

"We didn't think he saw us," he added. "But then he came ashore, picked up the poles and took off."

Young James cried all night and the next day, his father reclaimed the pole from the rangers' headquarters, recalled Jennifer Prosek, his older sister. Mr. Prosek's second meeting with Mr. Haines was equally unnerving. Again James, then 15 years old, and a friend were casting their lines in forbidden waters, this time from the dam at the Aspetuck Reservoir, also in Easton.

Mr. Haines issued them both a written warning, and then he recognized James as the boy who lived across the street from his mother-in-law. He also remembered the event five years earlier. "I knew he was from a good family, so I decided I would take him under my wing and teach him that he could catch just as big a fish in legal places as he could sneaking into the reservoirs," Mr. Haines, 57, said. "I also told him it would make him feel that much better."

Mr. Haines became a sort of second father to James, a fishing father. He said he never expected his student to go as far as he has.

"As far as drawing, painting and carving, James has it way over me," Mr. Haines said. "He's always asking questions."

"We'll be driving past a stream and he'll ask, 'What kind of fish do you think are in there? What do you think they eat?' I say, 'James, what do you think I am, the Encyclopedia Britannica?'"

Over the past five years Mr. Prosek has traveled thousands of miles throughout the United States to catch and document rare trout species. For three days last summer, for example, he camped out in northern Maine to fish for an obscure blueback trout native to only eight ponds in the state. His patience paid off on the third day, when he hooked one in 35 feet of water, photographed and released it. He is one of only a handful of fishermen in the world to ever catch one, Mr. Haines said.

Why such devotion to something that makes him see trout fishing as a metaphor for life?

"They're pretty, they're streamlined and they're good survivors," Mr. Prosek said. "They live in moving water, which is appealing. And they provide a challenge, because they're difficult to catch."

Mr. Prosek is most fascinated with brook trout, the only native trout in Connecticut. All the other species, including the brown and the rainbow, have been introduced to the region and are regularly stocked in the state's waterways.

Choking the Spawning Beds

The brook trout "has a fragile existence and requires pure, cold, well-oxygenated water in which to live and spawn," he writes in his book outline.

The pristine, wild trout streams in

An Easton artist is also a 'scientific fisherman,' his fishing buddy says.

Connecticut are disappearing today due to new developments, he adds. Condominium projects alone, he said, have caused so much erosion and filth "that they've choked the spawning beds of streams holding native fish."

He gave a wry smile when he talked about remaining native trout streams he has ferreted out, refusing to divulge their locations as if it were a matter of national security.

He also plans to dig out a spring hole near his home so he can cross-breed brown and brook trout into tiger trout, a rarity in Connecticut. The state tried a similar plan a few years back, he said, but all the tiger trout were either fished out or died off, since the hybrids are sterile and cannot reproduce.

"I don't like messing with nature much, but it would just be neat," he said.

Mr. Prosek has also become somewhat of a mentor himself. Last month in Redding, he helped 36 children from Barnum Elementary School in Bridgeport bait hooks and untangle lines during a class field trip to the Saugatuck Reservoir. Mr. Haines also recently introduced Mr. Prosek to the field staff of the Department of Environmental Protection's fisheries division, so that Mr. Prosek can work with them on a state stream survey.

"I tell him, 'James, instead of going to Yale and not knowing what you're going to do, why not take fisheries

courses?'" Mr. Haines said. "Then he can be a fish biologist. He could be in charge of a state's fisheries department if he went on to get a Ph.D. He has the potential."

His father, Louis Prosek, who recently retired as a science teacher from the Trumbull public schools, said he always figured that fishing would be an avocation for his son. A career, he thought, would be reserved for medicine, even architecture, because of his son's talent at illustration.

"But with him it's a focus," he said. "He lives and breathes fish. It's a vehicle that takes him into nature."

"I was brought up quite differently, with my father's quote that the secret of life lies not in doing what you love to do, but in learning to love what you must do," added the father. "But James is obviously not going to go that route."

River Trek

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Prosek trekked nearly a mile up the Halfway River in Monroe toward the Newtown border. Wearing boots, since it was too hot for hip waders, and polarized sunglasses to cut down the glare, he was anxious to try out a mock inchworm he had just fashioned out of dyed green fur. "I cut one fish open I caught yesterday, and it was loaded with inchworms," he said.

Along the way, in between sharp, skillful whips of the fly line, he would stop to turn over rocks. His hand sifted under each for twigs where insect larvae had built homes, a marker of the food chain, a sure sign of the best bait. Soon, his head turned in the direction of a small splash about 100 feet upstream. He moved quickly. And in less than a minute, there was a small brown trout on his hook, one he would keep to fry for dinner that night.

After unhooking the fish, he mused over the fact that aside from the occasional date and the crew team at Yale, his entire social life has centered on fishing with friends and seeking out new waters. And he said there were no regrets about not being part of the party circuit.

Just then a rare breeze broke through the trees as did the sun, which illuminated the bank along an otherwise shaded river. Holding the trout on a small branch slid through its gill opening, he paused to look up at the wind rustling through the hemlocks and the maples.

"This is Heaven," he said. ■