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Due South
Travel and Adventure for the Southern Soul

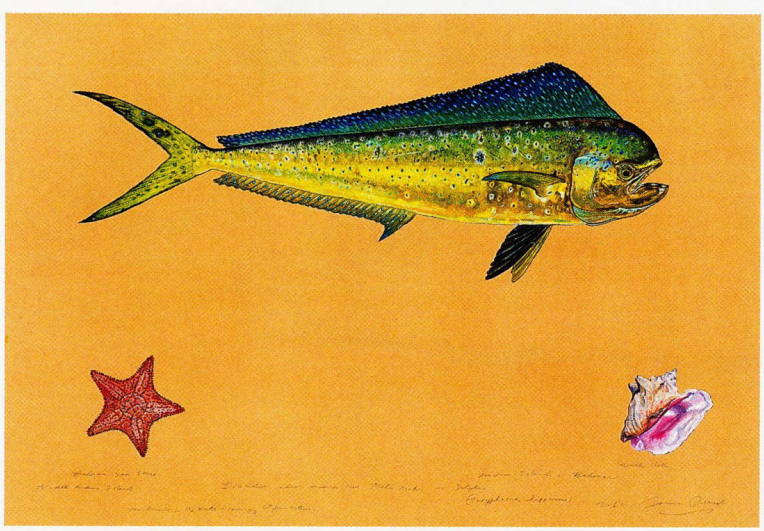
An Artist's Journal

A passionate angler makes a pilgrimage to Cumberland Island in hopes of catching wild beauty

text and paintings by **JAMES PROSEK**

I HAD VAGUELY HEARD OF CUMBERLAND ISLAND IN Georgia when my friend Marty called me to ask if I would like to go fishing for tarpon there. Something somewhere I'd read or heard led me to believe the island was shrouded in mystery. I pictured any of those southern Atlantic coastal places as being hot and the live oak forests dark and tangled, the air so thick it hung in visible tendrils from the ends of Spanish moss. I had been to Spring Island near Savannah once to give a talk and spent a few days in residence at a studio they offered to artist-lecturers, making watercolors of bluegills and area plants, fascinated by the big fox squirrels, which were like cats with puffier tails. I loved the place and awaited the opportunity to return to this kind of habitat.

A little research showed me that my suspicions had been correct. Cumberland has had a deep and complex history with humans, native and European, for longer than most Atlantic coastal places (except for other favorite New England islands I knew well like Cuttyhunk Island off the elbow of Cape Cod). Feral horses famously roam Cumberland, said to be descended from ones left by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. There are lots of alligators and ghostly brick chimneys, the only remnants of old slave quarters. A single



Catch Book
Clockwise from top left: Prosek's notebook filled with sketches; hard at work on a blue marlin painting; a dolphin.

family, the Carnegies, had owned the island from the late nineteenth century until 1971. Most of the island is now a national park, but a portion is still owned by the Carnegies. Pristine Cumberland came close to meeting the fate of other area islands when the Hilton Head developer Charles Fraser began amassing an interest in the late 1960s, as detailed in John McPhee's book *Encounters with the Archdruid.* Thankfully, under pressure from Carnegie descendants and politicians, Fraser sold the land to the U.S. government, and it has been designated national seashore since 1972. In the hands of the government and its few private stewards, it seems to have retained its wildness, and changed little, over the last century.

The island was bought by Thomas Carnegie—brother of steel magnate Andrew—and his wife, Lucy, in the 1880s. In 1884 they began building a fifty-nine-room mansion called Dungeness. Dungeness and several other mansions around the island are now in disrepair or ruin, relics of the peak Carnegie occupation of the island, with the exception of the Greyfield mansion, now known as the Greyfield Inn, the only place where visitors can stay overnight. Among the Carnegies descended from Thomas who have retained a foothold on Cumberland was my friend Marty's wife, Nanny.

But enough of the history lesson. I was there to see the natural beauty, spend time with friends, and catch fish. The history was only important in helping come to some understanding about how Cumberland escaped large-scale development and remains a sanctuary for native plants and a nursery for young fish. Years earlier Marty had shown me photos of his son Andy holding a brace of large red snapper caught off Cumberland. I remembered this when he invited me tarpon fishing, because although I love tarpon, I had another agenda. I was working on a book project to paint thirty-five life-size Atlantic fish based on specimens I had seen myself. The idea was to be on the boat when each of these fish first came out of the water and to capture those fleeting colors that fishermen are privileged to see. I was not painting a fish to represent a species in a field guide, but an individual, and would show all the personal quirks of that specimen. I had traveled to places as varied as the Cape Verde Islands to see a big blue marlin and on a harpoon

boat on Georges Bank off Nova Scotia to see a swordfish. The red snapper had eluded me.

I had been searching and hoping for an opportunity to see a big genuine red snapper and had heard mixed reports on how difficult or easy this might be. Some said the 2011 oil spill combined with overfishing in the Gulf had hurt the population there; others said there had never been more snapper around—such contradictions, from my experience, were part of typical fisherman talk. Marty said his friend David Burns, a local guide out of nearby Amelia Island, Florida, could help. The red snapper fishery had been completely closed for two and a half years from Florida to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, because of a decline in the population due to overharvesting, and the snapper had made a strong comeback. The moratorium was still in effect, and though you couldn't target or keep red snapper, a day spent bottom fishing often resulted in a number of them. Burns said he'd recently caught a bunch over thirty inches. That sounded like a nice snapper. It was such an iconic Atlantic food fish, I wanted to get the painting right.

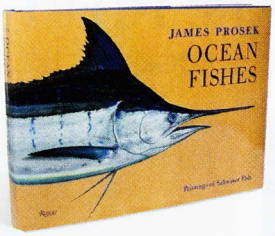
Whether or not there is a snapper shortage I cannot say, all I can tell you is, when we dropped our rigs to the bottom, our baits were quickly devoured by all manner of fish, including black seabass, grunts, grouper, triggerfish, and red snapper. In fact, we caught snapper all day long. I took lots of notes, made lots of sketches and measurements, and took many photos. I was delighted to see such a beautiful fish, and so many diverse specimens. Some had whitish gray blotches among the vermilions and deep cadmium reds, others were just as red as toy fish, and I wondered if people would believe they actually looked like that if I painted them that way.

The fishing was fun, even though I spent the first day very seasick (lack of sleep and a bad hangover didn't help), but the paintings I was making for this book were not just about the fish, they were about the entire experience of being in a place, in the ecosystem where the fish lived. The beach is not some dividing line between oceans and land; rather, there is a great exchange of life from sea to land and back again. For me the ecosystem includes the plants on the beach, the blue crabs and the cacti and the pink morning glory growing in long vines on the hot sand, the oystercatchers and the blue mussels. It also includes the people, the cookouts and the smell of burning charcoal, the storytelling (telling ghost stories is a big part of the Cumberland experience), catching ghost crabs on the beach at night, searching for fossilized shark teeth on low tide, the heavy air. All these experiential elements bleed into the paintings. I tell people they are not paintings of fish, they are experience-driven self-portraits; if I see my reflection in the fish scales or the eyes, I will paint myself in, and all the memories and emotions of the trip are distilled on its flanks. In the end it may look like a fish, but it is certainly more than that for me.

I ran one morning from Marty and Nanny's house to the ruins of the old Carnegie mansion, Dungeness, and on the way back, walked some of the sandy trails with red bay leaf and beautyberry

among the palmettos. In the late afternoon we pulled a seine net along the beach and caught sea trout and pompano as well as a small shark. Oystercatchers by the dozens lay in the sand, and behind them wild horses grazed on the beach grasses. It was a blessing that the island had escaped large-scale development. It was a privilege to be there and eat lots of fresh fish. To be sure, there were plenty of other fish to eat besides red snapper while they were off-limits. Triggerfish are plentiful and as delicious as any, as well as pink and vermilion snapper, king mackerel, and cobia. We feasted and drank good amounts of gin. And ultimately Cumberland gave me what I came for.

It gave me the red snapper, but it also gave me a good feeling, something about the human spirit that was perhaps in my own mind but not entirely tangible. From what I could tell, the Carnegie descendants were part of this island, its natural habitat and rich history. They clearly felt a deep commitment to protecting the magic and mystery. One night we sat in the living room of one of the family homes on the island, having a drink before dinner. There was a painting over the mantel that I couldn't stop looking at, moody and haunting with muted tones. Marty explained that the painting was of his wife's grandparents when they were young parents visiting Cumberland. Her grandfather, tall and lanky, is standing, and her grandmother, Nancy Carnegie, is seated with a baby girl in her lap. The grandfather has a pipe in his mouth. The two boys are dressed for play, and my host's mother-in-law sits directly on the bare ground as the girl looks wistfully at a bouquet of yellow flowers. There is a dog that looks thirsty from the heat, and the backdrop is a tunnel of live oaks on a straight road ending, as many on Cumberland do, at the sea. Behind them are the chimneys from the slave houses (pre-Carnegie), and they are all dressed in what look like peasant clothes. It's not a society painting as you'd expect from a family of their means. Instead they were reveling in their modesty. I was telling Marty why I thought it was a great picture. "I never liked it," he said. "None of them are smiling." But to me, a Connecticut Yankee, it represented something, even if I couldn't put words to it. Besides the red snapper and the nature on the island, the painting was part of my Cumberland experience. I hope to return one day.



FISH AS ART

James Prosek published his first book, *Trout*, when he was nineteen years old. The book propelled him to the top of the art world, and he was called the "Audubon of the fishing world" by the *New York Times*. His latest book, *Ocean Fishes* (Rizzoli, $40), will be published in October. The book represents Prosek's goal to paint the ocean's most pursued sport fish in life size (from a 14-inch porgy to a 12-foot, 8-inch blue marlin). The resulting paintings are of fish that seem lifted from the water and slapped onto the pages during that time, as only an angler knows, when a fish has all of its living color.