



“There have been too many Adams, and they have named everything.” —Harold Bloom

ART AND TEXT BY JAMES PROSEK

The Failure of Names

An artist puts his faith in diversity over taxonomy



LEFT: *Double Pheasant*, 2006

RIGHT: *Bird of Paradise*, 2005



WHEN I WAS FOUR or five years old, I would draw birds at the kitchen table. As I finished each piece I asked my mother to write the names of the birds beneath the pictures: *Cock of the Rock*, *Plate-Billed Toucan*, *Motmot*. Somehow a picture wasn't finished if the animal's name wasn't there.

When I learned to write, I scrawled the common and scientific names of each creature beneath my drawings myself—by example of Audubon, or any others who made paintings in the natural-history tradition. At nine I developed a passion for trout and began to compile a list of all the diverse types I could find in books and magazines.

In my mind, an animal was distinct from others if it had been given a scientific name. My view was that the classification of creatures was figured out by authority figures and that I should defer to that authority. In the process of painting different types of trout, though, I learned that even the authorities could not agree on the names they gave to describe the enormous diversity of fishes in the Salmonidae family. Some trout had been named a separate species and subsequently renamed a subspecies, placed in a different genus, or just pushed into a category with allied species. The history of the naming became as interesting to me as the physical diversity of the fishes themselves, which I loved to paint.

I wanted to believe that there were many more distinct creatures rather than fewer, because then I had more trout to paint and to put into what I hoped would eventually become a book of the trout of North America. I used any and all sources I could find in assembling what eventually did become my first book, *Trout: An Illustrated History*—a book of seventy watercolors. I had not yet explored the idea that naturalists named things because they wanted to create a legacy for themselves, or wished to be published more, or because of an innate human compulsion. I accepted the names without question—at least where there was consensus. Where there wasn't, I either made an educated decision or included the argument over a species' status in the text that would accompany each fish.

Since I had seen only a fraction of the trout I painted in my book, there was some amount of mythologizing and imagination involved. I had traveled across country with a friend for a

RIGHT: *Old Squaw*, 2007
NEXT SPREAD: *Spiral Flicker*, 2006

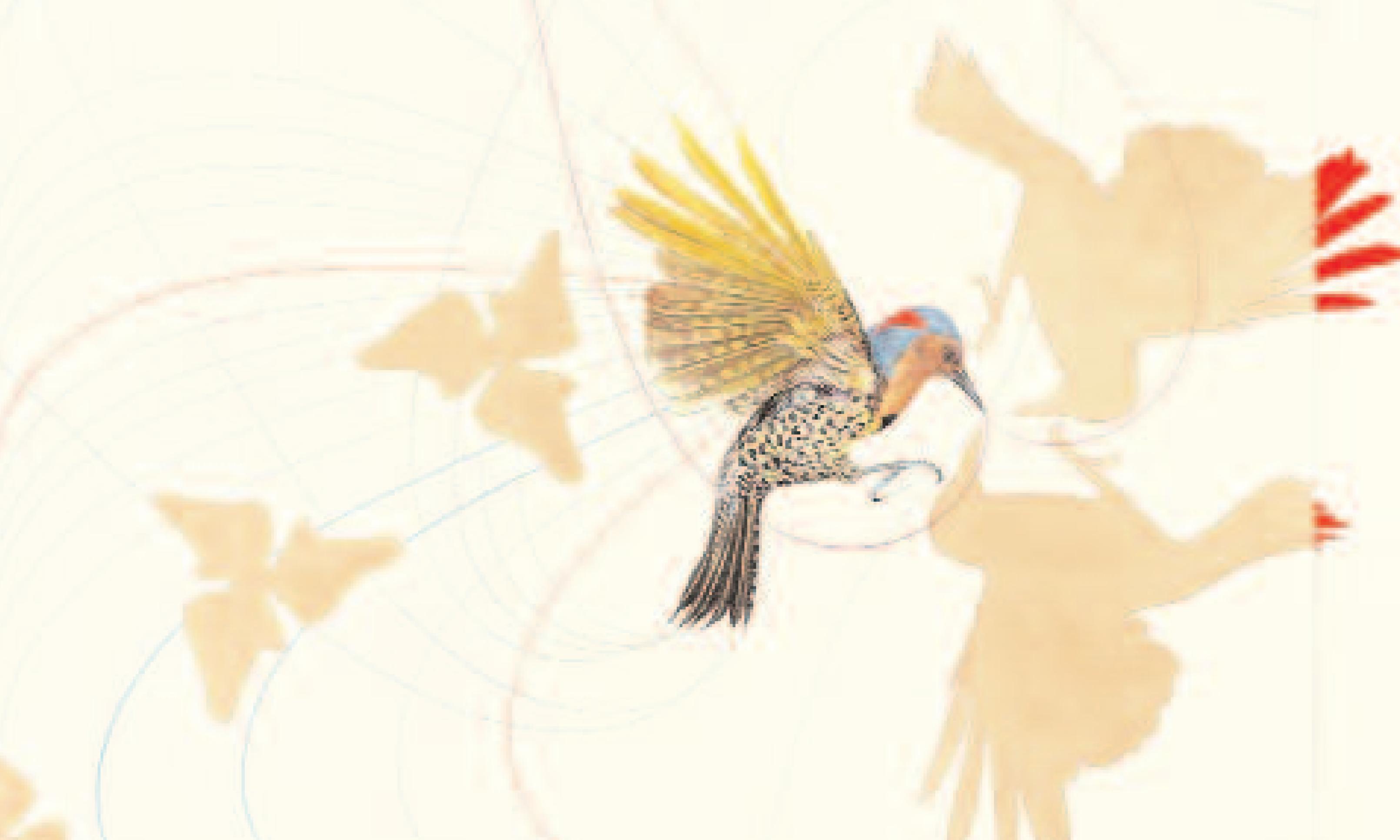
summer when we were just old enough to drive, and we hiked and searched out native trout in many western states. The rest I painted from photos other people had taken and from descriptions in old books. A favorite source was David Starr Jordan and Barton Warren Evermann's 1902 book, *American Food and Game Fishes*. Jordan, the first president of Stanford University, named a fair number of the native trout west of the Continental Divide, including some trout he described only from dead specimens. The "longfin char" of the Canadian Arctic was based on a tenuous description from a remote lake in Greenland. But Jordan was an authority, so I happily added his fish to my list, and painted it from his descriptions.

As I painted trout through my late teens, major shifts in trout taxonomy were taking place. Through genetic analysis, which was fairly new in the early '90s, it was discovered that rainbow trout (from the Pacific coast) and brown trout (introduced from Europe) were not as closely related as once thought. The genes showed that the rainbow trout was more closely related to Pacific salmon, fishes that die when they spawn, of the genus *Oncorhynchus*. The brown trout was more closely related to the Atlantic salmon, and remained in the genus *Salmo*. The native trout of my home state, Connecticut, the brook trout, was actually a whole separate genus, *Salvelinus*, more closely related to the Arctic char than to the rainbow or brown trout. Technically, it was no longer correct even to call the book I was working on *Trout*. I found myself wanting to ignore the namers because they were getting in the way of my own personal vision.

I began to understand that species were less static than the fathers of modern taxonomy—those like Carl Linnaeus—once believed. That nature was static and classifiable was an idea perpetuated by the natural history museum (repository for dead nature), the zoo (repository for living nature), and the book (repository for thoughts and images related to nature). These mediums were all distillations of nature, what individuals of authority deemed an appropriate cross section to present to the public. None had adequately represented Nature—at once chaotic, multifarious, and interconnected.

In the process of painting and writing my second trout book, *Trout of the World*, I gathered most of the information firsthand





THIS PAGE: *Winter Wren*, 2006

RIGHT: *King Vulture*, 2006



during extensive travels through Europe and Asia. As I saw more of the world and its trout in person, a few things became clearer to me. A species like the brown trout, its native range stretching from Iceland to the Pamir Mountains of Kyrgyzstan, from the Kola Peninsula in Russia to Morocco, was highly variable. Pretty much every stream I pulled brown trout from, they looked different—not only every population, but every individual. There was no way that names could account for all this diversity. Were names then inadequate in the face of our changing relationship with, and view of, nature?

Ironically, despite the beauty and diversity I had witnessed, the differences between the fish I saw were not as great as I'd wished they'd been—not as great as the differences between the trout in my first book, when I accentuated characteristics that I had deemed important, based on bad photos and vague descriptions and colorful names. I was conflicted—I loved the names that had first led me to recognize the existence of diversity (golden trout, *Oncorhynchus aguabonita*; blueback trout, *Salvelinus oquassa*), but as I learned more I wanted to throw away the names, step beyond those constraints, in order to preserve a sense of wonder that I had felt from an early age.

Such thoughts were the origin of the curvilinear lines in my present work. For a long time I thought that my profession would be architecture, and that's what I initially studied in

college. The first paintings I did with lines emanating from creatures were meant to be imaginings of what God's or Nature's blueprint of a particular creature might look like. After drawing curvilinear lines, first emanating from the points on the body of a seahorse, I realized the lines were helpful as visual aids to point out particular parts of a creature that I wanted to bring attention to. The lines activated the space around the animal in a satisfactory way, erasing the need for the name to be written beneath. In this way, the lines became a very personal visual taxonomy, replacing the lingual one.

The lines in these works are also there to acknowledge that nothing is absolute, that even the laws of physics, though tested again and again, may one day buckle in the face of some unknown force. How can we say for sure otherwise? We willingly accept the way people in the past have viewed and arranged the world. Does bowing to that authority prevent us from looking at things with a fresh perspective? Naming gives us the illusion that nature is fixed, but it is as fluid as the language used to describe it. It is a challenge of the artist (if no one else) to un-name and re-name the world to remind us that fresh perspectives exist. ♪

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