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## New Jersey sports painter's wildlife watercolors to benefit conservation



Green

Tree Frog in watercolors by Painter James Fiorentino (Image courtesy of the Conserve Wildlife Foundation)

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The debut of "Rare Wildlife Revealed", James Fiorentino's 25 watercolor paintings of New Jersey wildlife, certainly wasn't as quiet as most art openings.

Amid the tinny clinking of glasses and piercing squawking of a peregrine falcon — brought by the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey's wildlife biologists — a full room of over 200 people gathered at the D&R Greenway Land Trust in Princeton, N.J.

The Conserve Wildlife Foundation, which develops educational programming and supports scientific research in order to protect threatened and endangered animal species in New Jersey, brought about a dozen biologists and educators to the gallery. They discussed their work with the species that Fiorentino painted for the exhibit.

"When you see some of these animals in the wild up close, it's very magical. That's the best way to say it," said Fiorentino. With "Rare Wildlife Revealed", Fiorentino says he's trying to capture what it feels like to see these animals on their own turf.

"To see them in person — some of them, to see them in the wild — that really makes the project strong," said Fiorentino.

Fiorentino learned of this project when he was invited to judge "Species on the Edge", the Conserve Wildlife Foundation's annual 5th grade art contest.

"We're so thrilled about his work. His art puts a spotlight on species great and small," said David Wheeler, Executive Director of the Conserve Wildlife Foundation. "In a sense, it allows people to connect with nature in a way that's sometimes all-too-easy to miss"

At the gallery opening, Fiorentino introduced Former New Jersey Gov. Tom Kean, who was billed as the night's "special guest" because Kean, a long-time admirer of Fiorentino's work, wrote the forward for *Rare Wildlife Revealed*, the painter's new book. Proceeds will benefit the Conserve Wildlife Foundation.

"One of our hopes is that people will be inspired to look at the wildlife around us in a wholly new way," said Wheeler. "In a densely populated area like the Northeast, wildlife is often overlooked."

Kean spoke about how important he felt the Conserve Wildlife Foundation has been for preserving species in the Garden State. He also thanked D&R Greenway President and CEO Linda Mead for the Land Trust's support.

Though Fiorentino says he's had a life-long love of nature, the painter is perhaps best known for his portraits of sports stars. For years, he's used oil to make hyper-realistic paintings — including Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle, and Cal Ripken Jr.

"I think when you love to draw as a kid, you kind of draw everything you like," he said. "Looking back, I was drawing bald eagles and tigers and obviously all the baseball stuff. So, I've always had a passion since I was as little about nature and animals."

At 15, Fiorentino became the youngest artist to be featured in the National Baseball Hall of Fame Museum for his rendering of Yankees right fielder Reggie Jackson.

"I'm always presenting, and giving paintings to these really famous athletes," he says. "You know, everybody knows what they look like — and they certainly do — so there's more pressure in doing that, actually. When you paint these animals, nobody really knows exactly what they look like, so it's always easier. The pressure's not on as much."

With the pressure off, the artist has time to paint tiny details: the thick orange fur of the bobcat, the crisp white feathers of the bald eagle. Fiorentino says each painting is more than labor of love: it's a symbol of awe.

The show will be at D&R Greenway until October 16. Then, it'll move to Studio 7 in Morristown, in North Jersey. Over the next three years, the art will travel to seven galleries, including the Salmagundi Club on 5th Avenue in New York next April. The show will close in June 2018.