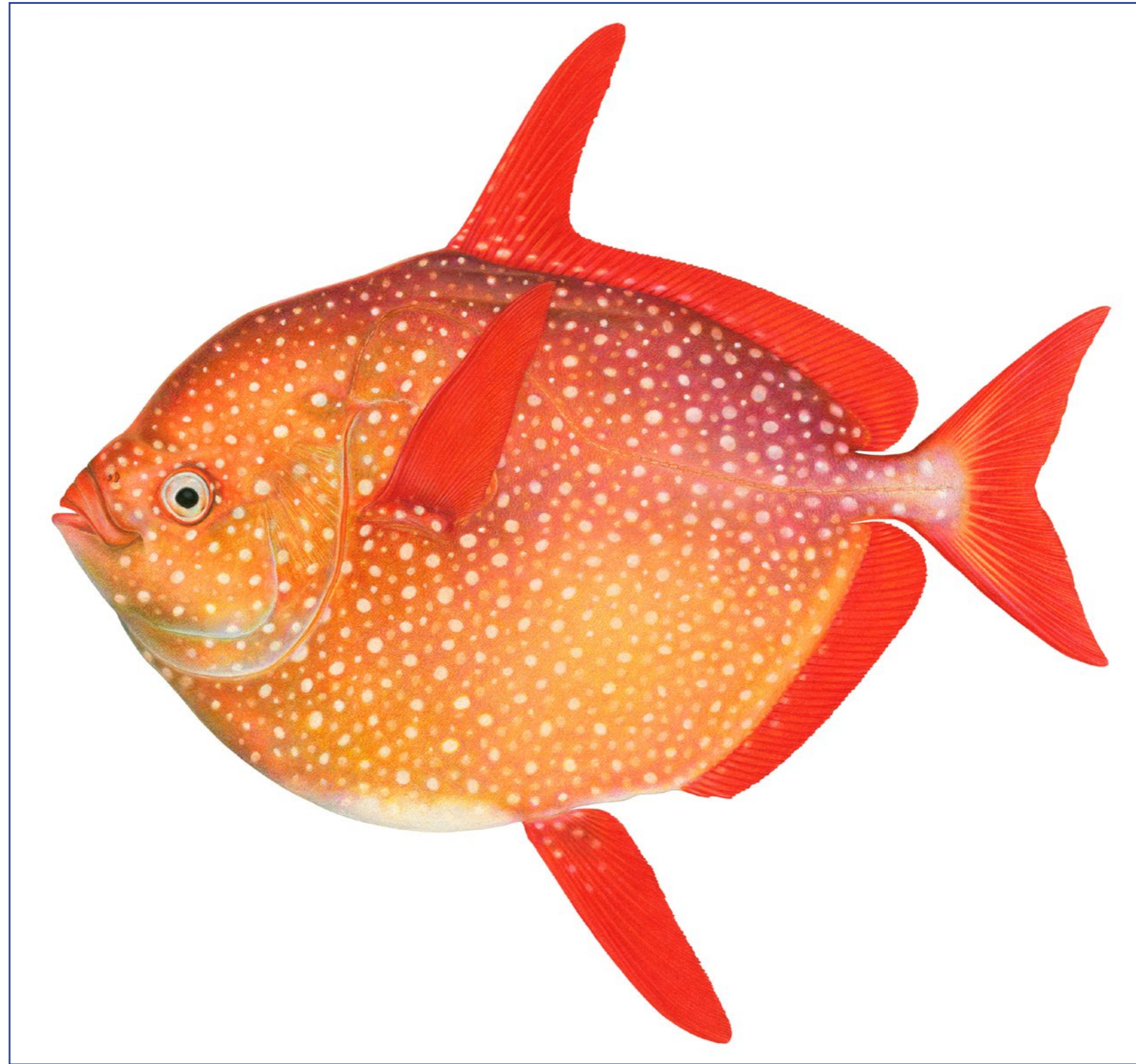


Joseph R. Tomelleri



P O R T F O L I O



Rendered for scientific accuracy, the brilliantly detailed and colorful illustrations of fish by American artist Joseph R. Tomelleri have appeared in over a thousand publications. *X-Ray Mag* interviewed the artist, who is based in Leawood, Kansas, to learn more about his artwork and his perspectives.

X-RAY MAG: Tell us about yourself, your background and how you became an artist, and why fish? How did you come to this theme in your artwork and how did you develop your style of painting?

JRT: I was a master's candidate at Fort Hays State University in 1984 (Master of Science in Biology), when several graduate students and I decided to publish a small book for the university about the creek

that flowed through campus—*Big Creek and its Fishes*. Fishes can be somewhat problematic to photograph and ours were no exception. To avoid the irregularities of photography, I decided to try and solve the problem by illustrating all the species. Prior to that time, I had dabbled a bit in art, but not seriously.

Being an artistic neophyte, I approached the owner of a local art supply store about what medium might work best. He suggested colored pencil (Berol Prismacolor). I guess it took about 100 illustrations, maybe 2,500 to 3,000 hours to become proficient. I do not like to look much at my early work; meaning, hopefully, that I have gotten better over the years.

X-RAY MAG: Who or what has inspired you and your artwork and why?

Pumpkinseed, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 8 x 10in (~20 x 25cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 200. This freshwater sunfish typically measures 4in (10cm) in length.



PREVIOUS PAGE:
Opah, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 18 x 19in (~46 x 48cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 25. Drawn for *Fishes of the Salish Sea: Puget Sound and the Straits of Georgia and Juan de Fuca* by Theodore Wells Pietsch and James Wilder Orr. Opahs are solitary endothermic ocean fish that can reach up to 6.6ft (2m) in length and weigh up to 600 lb (272kg).

Yaqui Trout, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 10 x 17in (~25 x 43cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 200. This Mexican trout was found in Arroyo Yenquin in northwestern Chihuahua.



Plateau Orangethroat Darter, Male,
by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print,
8 x 10in (~20 x 25cm), signed and num-
bered limited edition of 200. Drawn for
Kansas Fishes, edited by Mark Eberle.
This darter was found in Spring River in
southeastern Kansas. These small fish
can grow up to 2.4 to 2.75in (6-7cm).

JRT: My aunt, Donna Aldridge, is a well-known Kansas City artist. She gave me a few art lessons when I was a little shaver, encouraged me and gave me confidence in my work. Almost all my fish art is done as “left-lateral” view, which is a scientific standard that was developed in the 1800s. Fishes were drawn on their left side (facing to the left) because by convention, any scale work or tissue samples, etc., were always taken from the right side, leaving the left intact. There are a number of artists that paint fish whom I admire; among them are Al Agnew, Larry Tople, Mark Susinno, Jon Wright—to name a few. They are doing “in habitat” work, which I think is more difficult than what I do.

X-RAY MAG: What is your artistic method or creative process?

JRT: The process of illustration typically begins with collection of the fish—by seine, angling, or electroshocking, etc. The fish is photographed live upon collection to preserve natural colors, then preserved in 10% formalin or frozen in the case of larger fish (they lose almost all color upon preservation in formalin). After at least a week in formalin, the specimen is washed in water, then transferred to 70% ethanol. For drawing, the “alcoholic” specimen is measured and an outline is freehanded onto a six-ply cotton-rag museum board (cold-press surface is best for colored pencil).

Colors are layered one upon another to arrive at the best approximation of color for the fish. The specimen is being constantly referenced during drawing to get the scale counts, fin-ray counts and other diagnostic characters correct.

X-RAY MAG: What is your relationship to the underwater world? Are you a scuba diver or a snorkeler and how have your experiences underwater influenced your art? In your relationship with fish and aquatic ecosystems, where have you had your favorite experiences?

JRT: I have only dived twice with scuba gear, so most of my time underwater has

been snorkeling, and much of that in gin-clear Ozark streams—another world ENTIRELY from that of the air-breathing world. The clarity with which one can view the fishes is incredible. Thus, there is no question that photographing fishes for color is better if a specimen is held under an inch or so of water, or if it is viewed live in a “Photoquarium.” This is especially true of darters, which if held in hand often appear much darker than they would if observed underwater.

My favorite spot would be any number of Ozark streams and the myriad of species in those clear waters. My most memorable experience, however, would be snor-

keling with golden trout in the Golden Trout Wilderness—with no wetsuit, mind you, under some spotty surface ice; I lasted maybe 30 seconds.

X-RAY MAG: What are your thoughts on the conservation of oceans and aquatic ecosystems, and how does your artwork relate to these issues?

JRT: My illustrations are often used for ID guides, fishing regulations in many states, signage, and sometimes as fundraisers for environmental groups—Patagonia and Western Native Trout Initiative are two conservation-oriented groups that come to mind. Some of the fishes I illustrate are

threatened or endangered. In those instances, I will typically draw from a previously preserved museum specimen but will still photograph a live fish, occasionally from a captive population, or ideally in the wild—the wild fish requiring a special catch-and-release permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Several times, I have received specimens of extinct fish from the Smithsonian collection, and recreated color scientific illustrations from descriptions and the actual specimens. Some of those include yellowfin cutthroat, harelip sucker and whiteline topminnow.

X-RAY MAG: What is the message or experience you want viewers of your artwork to have or understand?

JRT: My illustrations are really a blend of science and art. The science portion is more the exacting nature of the work, as fishes are a bit more than just correct coloration. They will usually have a certain number/pattern/size of scales, spiny and soft fin-rays, certain body propor-



China Rockfish, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 14 x 20in (~36 x 51cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 100. Drawn for *Fishes of the Salish Sea*, written by Pietsch and Orr. This species can reach up to 18in (45cm).



Tiger Rockfish, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 14 x 20in (~36 x 51cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 100. Drawn for *Fishes of the Salish Sea*, written by Pietsch and Orr. This species can grow to 24in (61cm) in length.

tions, etc. That is where the actual specimen is indispensable. The artistic portion (and illustration is just art with tighter strictures) is my interpretation of the color, the shading, the spotting, the disposition or spread of the fins, reflection of the scales, etc. It is always going to be a bit stylized because it is not a photograph, but I am always trying to minimize the stylization the best I can, in favor of an overall look that really describes that species, i.e. a look that still shows the many diagnostic details of that species, which may not be evident in a photo.

X-RAY MAG: What are the challenges or benefits of being an artist in the world today? Any thoughts or advice for aspiring artists in ocean arts?

JRT: The biggest challenge I would guess is marketing, as the Internet is absolutely flooded with fish pictures; digital photography being a vast source of those. Another problem is keeping bootlegged images off the Internet, many of which appear on products for sale. The best advice I could give aspiring artists is to see "it" for yourself, be it landscapes, fishes, crustaceans, or what-have-you. If it is not possible to see that animal alive, try to find museum specimens to work from if you feel the need to do exacting work. I had to work from museum specimens for most of the pictures in the *Fishes of the Salish Sea* books. Not ideal, but necessary.

X-RAY MAG: How do people, adults and children respond to your works?

JRT: People mostly want to know how long it took to draw a particular fish. Maybe they are calcu-

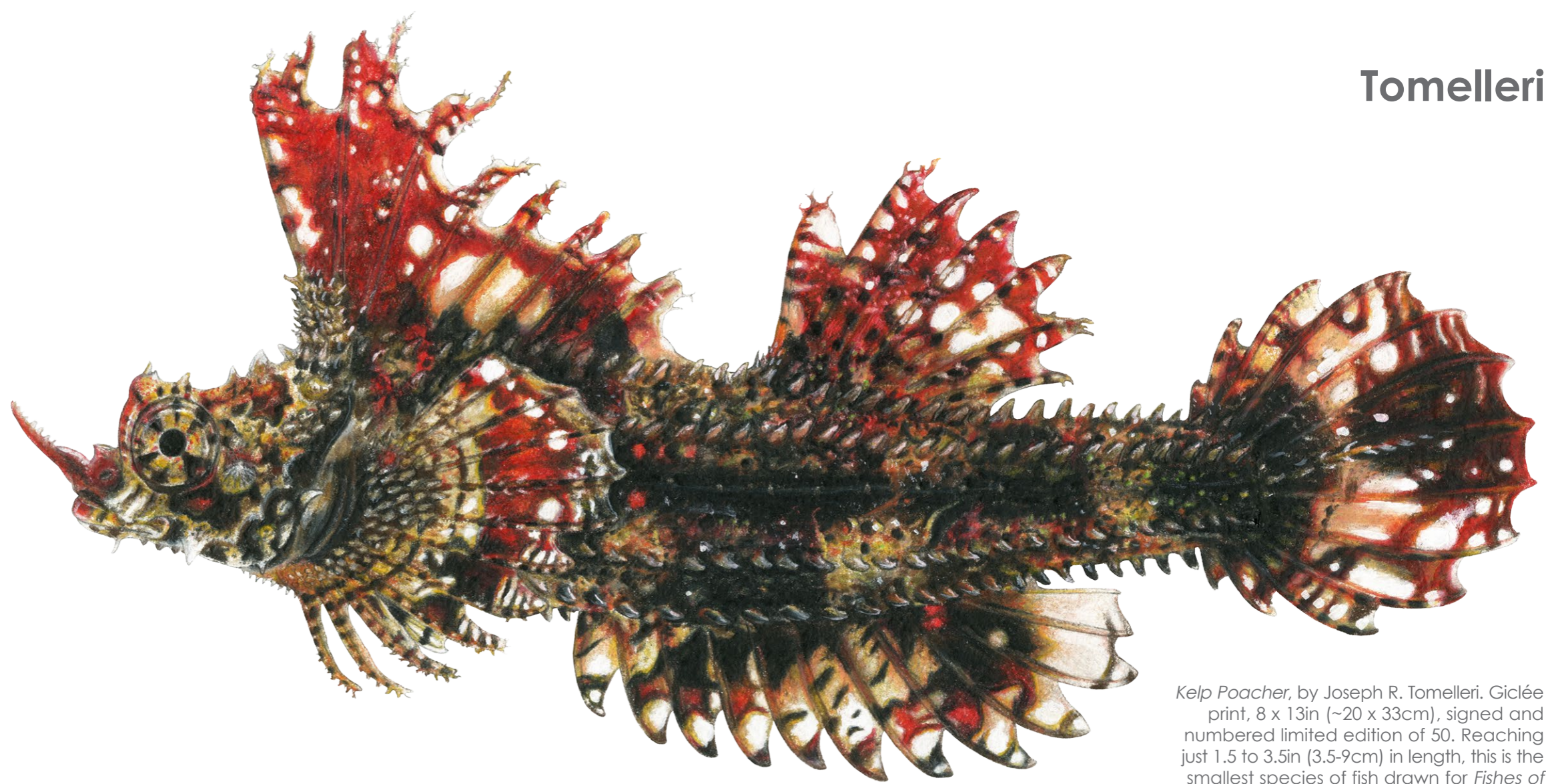
lating how much per hour for that original artwork! Lately, I just tell them it took me 62 years, which is my current age.

Inevitably, when I do a demonstration, kids are more interested in the preserved fish that I might have sitting in water on the drawing table. They will want to know if it's real, and often want to know if it's alive!

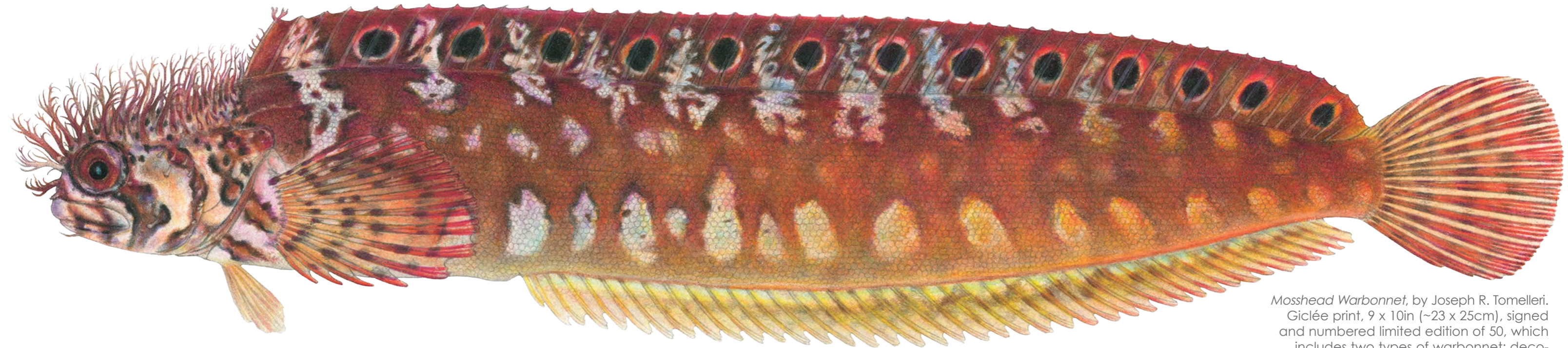
X-RAY MAG: What are your upcoming projects, art courses or events?

JRT: In 2019, University of Washington Press released *Fishes of the Salish Sea: Puget Sound and the Straits of Georgia and Juan de Fuca*, a three-volume set that I started in 2005 and finished in 2018. Ted Pietsch and James Orr are the authors.

Currently, I am finishing a salmon/steelhead/coastal cutt project for a British Columbia publication. It includes parr, smolt, post-smolt, adult, spawning male and females of all the species, and interestingly has top-down views of all the smaller forms, which are useful for field ID (I hope!). Sean Godwin and Marty Krkosek are authoring, and the Pacific Salmon Foundation is funding the project.



Kelp Poacher, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 8 x 13in (~20 x 33cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 50. Reaching just 1.5 to 3.5in (3.5-9cm) in length, this is the smallest species of fish drawn for *Fishes of the Salish Sea*, written by Pietsch and Orr.



Mosshad Warbonnet, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 9 x 10in (~23 x 25cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 50, which includes two types of warbonnet: decorated and mosshad. This eel-like saltwater fish can grow up to about 6in (15cm) long.





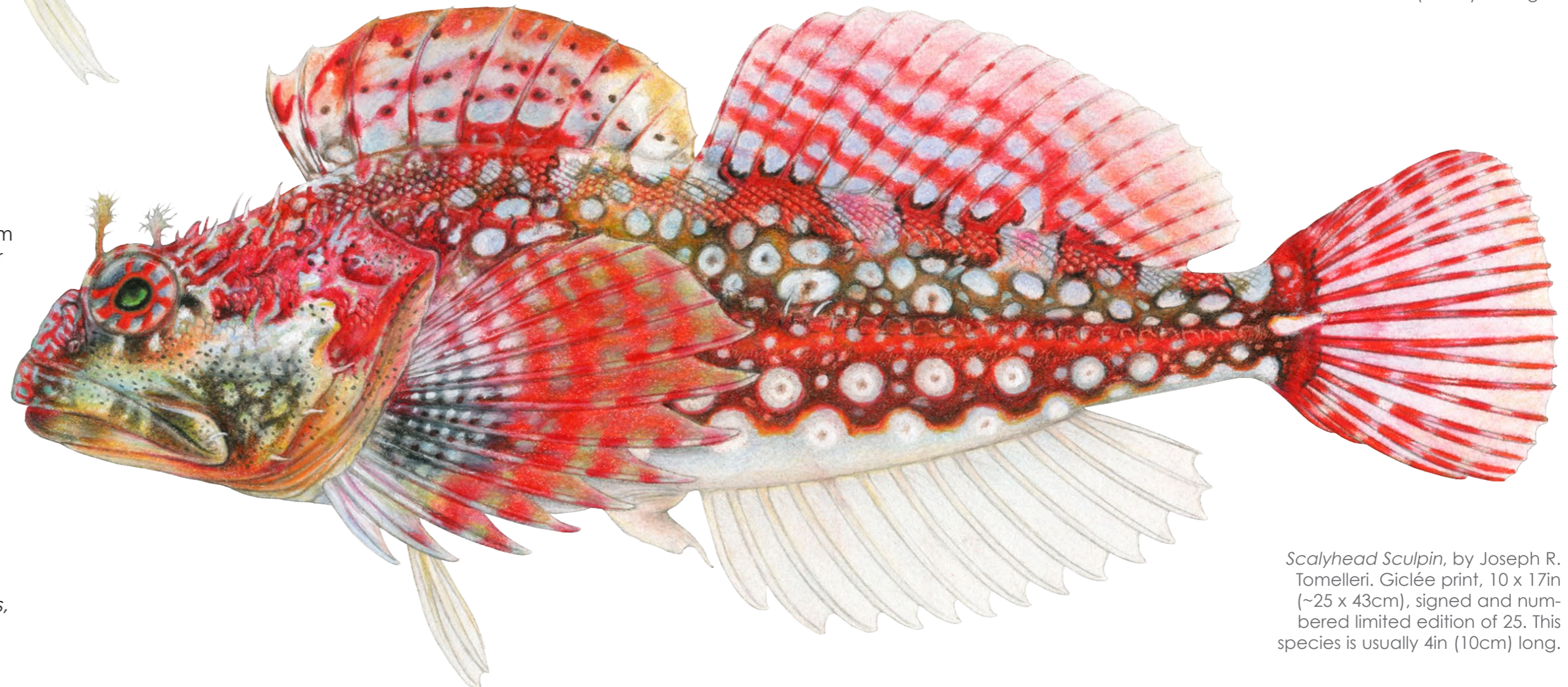
Smoothhead Sculpin, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 10 x 17in (~25 x 43cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 25. This species typically measures 5.5in (14cm) in length.

COVID-19 has slowed us a bit. Otherwise, I am always working in a Mexican trout here and there, as there seems to be an almost endless number of native forms from Chihuahua and Durango, known and unknown!

X-RAY MAG: Lastly, is there anything else you would like to tell our readers about yourself and your artwork?

JRT: Colored pencil is a slow and measured medium to work with (but probably not as difficult to master as say watercolor). The actual time to illustrate one fish, of course, depends on the size they are drawn, which might be from four inches in length to as long as 26 inches, smaller fishes usually go two or three times life-size, and for larger fish like salmon, maybe 70 percent of life-size. I work probably somewhere between 12 hours and 80 hours or more for one illustration. Time depends on the coloration too, with darker fishes being more time-consuming. A lot more time, effort and money are spent chasing those fishes though. But that is the best part of my job and it is tax deductible. ■

For more information or to order originals and prints, visit the artist's website at: americanfishes.com.



Scalyhead Sculpin, by Joseph R. Tomelleri. Giclée print, 10 x 17in (~25 x 43cm), signed and numbered limited edition of 25. This species is usually 4in (10cm) long.

CAPTION FISH FACT SOURCES: FISHBASE, WIKIPEDIA