

Adventures with Predators

by Jennifer White

I have been a member of the Greater Phoenix Pond Society for many years now. My husband and I had bought a house with a decrepit pond that was poorly designed and crumbling. But I was bitten by the pond bug. As serendipity would have it, while we were struggling to figure out how to build a new fish pond, my husband stumbled upon a newspaper article about an upcoming pond tour. The article talked about the GPPS, which we immediately joined. The pond tour was wonderful and I started attending the meetings, where I learned so much from the members and their ponds! I realized that there are many options in pond design and construction and, thanks to GPPS, we were able to decide which were best for us.

Of course, like all ponders, we have had our share of adventures, challenges, and disasters. In this essay I will focus on predators!

First I'd like to give you a bit of background about our pond's situation. It is in the front of our house, which means it can't be as deep as I'd like, but on the other hand, it's easier to clean. It's concrete rather than rubber-lined. The back of the pond is a wall of natural boulders with three waterfalls. The front is a curvy stucco-and-tile seating wall topped with saltillo tile. The backdrop is Lookout Mountain preserve across the street. It makes a lovely picture from our front window. It also creates a nice sushi bar for the wildlife.

We did design the pond with predator discouragement in mind. The sides are horizontal, which prevents hungry animals from wading in. There is nothing for herons and other animals to stand on, except the seating wall. Also, there are lots of hiding spots and caves among the boulders where the fish can find safety. We put a shade sail up to 1) provide some shade and help keep the shallow water a little cooler in summer, and 2) hopefully keep herons from spotting the fish from the air.

So, has all this prevented our fish from being eaten by predators? Heck no! But it does mean that MOST of the fish are able to escape. Usually only one or two are taken at a time. Fish are not that smart, but when they witness a pond mate being caught, they do know to hide. We have learned that short of catching the offending animal and strangling it with our bare hands, the best we can do is discourage the beast until it gives up and goes away. My advice: don't name your fish.

Here are descriptions of a few of our battles with nature.



Great Blue Herons

These are impressive and fascinating creatures. I am in awe, even as they are swallowing my fish! They stand about four feet tall and look like pterodactyls as they slowly flap away from the rocks I am throwing at them. Happily, the design of the pond doesn't allow a heron to wade in. Plus the fish learned to hide when they see it. The heron's fishing technique is this: It lands on the street above the pond, where the fish can't see. Then it walks down very slowly, one step at a time, so the fish don't notice. When the heron reaches the pond, it surprises the fish and attempts to spear one before they can all hide. That dang heron visited us twice a day and was often successful in catching a fish. We tried a few different things. Once I put netting over the pond. The herons seem to have very good eyesight and wouldn't go near it. But the netting is a pain in the neck and unattractive. We also tried placing mousetraps on the seating wall. The herons stayed away from those too. The wind blew them off and occasionally I still find a rusty mousetrap in the water. I saw a pond once with potted cacti all around the edge. Sharp rocks would work too, I think. The object is to discourage the heron until it decides to look for easier pickings, which ours eventually did. Obviously, mousetraps and sharp rocks on the seating wall are not very attractive or inviting, so we don't want to keep them there permanently. We put the sail shade up to somewhat hide the fish from birds flying over, and that helps. Once in a while we still get heron visits, but we put out the mousetraps and the herons give up pretty quickly.

Raccoon

This was our toughest opponent! I had never seen raccoons around here, but one recently discovered our fish pond. They are big enough to get right in the water, so the only defense the fish have is to hide. The raccoon came every night and enjoyed some success dining in our pond. I did research on the internet and by phone, and considered trapping the raccoon, but I decided to try some other ideas. I bought coyote urine, which, after calling a few Ace Hardware stores, I finally found. You can buy big boxes of it much cheaper online. But don't bother. It didn't work. A pack of curious coyotes came to check it out, yipping and howling in front of our house. The raccoon didn't give a darn.

I looked at some expensive devices that I would have to send away for that spray intruding wildlife with water. But my husband came up with an ingenious homemade raccoon repellent that worked like a charm! We bought a compact 250 watt halogen work light and a wireless motion activated alert. (You're supposed to mount the motion sensor outside your front door, and plug the wireless receiver into an interior outlet, with a lamp plugged into that. So, if someone is at your front door, the lamp turns on and the device beeps.) My brilliant hubby attached the motion detector to an iron stake and plugged the work light into the receiver, which was plugged into an exterior outlet. The motion detector and light were aimed at the pond.

That raccoon had quite a surprise when the bright light suddenly flashed on (it stays on for 1-5 minutes, your choice). It came back a few more times and was frightened away each time. Before long, it gave up and we haven't seen any evidence of raccoons since!

As an added entertainment bonus, our 4-year-old grandson came early one morning while it was still dark. I'm sure you've guessed that, as he ran past the pond toward our front door, the light came on and startled the heck out of him!

Mystery Monster

Every once in a while we see evidence that something came in the night and disturbed the pond, sometimes successfully catching a fish. Usually the critter doesn't come back and we can only guess what it was.

One early morning I came down the stairs and saw through the front window what looked like an orange goldfish up among the boulders above the pond. I went outside and found seven mutilated fish bodies strewn all over the patio! They were torn up, some with their heads bitten off. The potted water plants were knocked over and the surviving fish were in hiding. What would have gotten into the pond and so viciously attacked the fish, biting them and flinging them, but not eating them?? I was horrified and stumped.

A couple of days later I ran into our next-door neighbor. He told me he saw a large male javelina with large tusks coming out of our front patio on the morning of the fish massacre, about an hour before I came down to find the horrific scene! Happily, the angry peccary hasn't returned for further mayhem. How would I deal with that?

I have a friend who admires our fish pond. She said she was thinking of building a pond in her yard and asked if my fish ever get eaten by predators. I told her the truth. There are things you can do to minimize it, but once in a while you are going to lose a fish. It's the "circle of life" I told her. She cried, "I hate the circle of life!" I advised her to forget about an outdoor fish pond and stick with her indoor aquarium, which she did.

