Pond Safety: How to Identify and Stop Pond Predators

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Everyone who loses valuable fish comes to the same conclusion... it is time to pay more attention to predator control. Here is what to do to prevent bad things from happening in your pond.

Get to know your local predators

Predators arrive at your pond by many routes:

- On the land: Raccoons, opossums, muskrats, beavers, otters, foxes, or even bears may eat your fish. Though deer will not eat your fish, they might take a break from your garden to graze on your pond plants.
- Through the air: Most wild birds will leave your fish alone, but there are two species that must be dealt with if they are common in your area, herons and kingfishers. Herons are aggressive fishing machines, and they can wipe out a pond of Koi in a few hours. The much smaller, but well-named kingfisher will swoop in from a nearby tree or perch and spear your fish with his long sharp beak.
- In the water: If you have a creek or natural body of water nearby, amphibians can find their way into your pond. They commonly migrate through wet grass or standing water during heavy spring rains. Large bullfrogs may eat small fish. Snapping turtles will eat anything.

Wherever you live, there are probably more potential predators about than you think. Even in a suburban neighborhood, it is becoming more common to see woodland wildlife like foxes and raccoons. And due to changes in climate and the availability of habitat, more animals are finding their way into backyards like yours. The range of coyotes, bobcats, and other large wild cats, for example, is increasing, with many being sighted in urban areas.

You can learn a great deal about local predators by contacting your municipal animal control, or your county or state fish and game departments. If you are fortunate to have a pond association in your area, members can be a valuable resource. All of these people may be able to advise you on the types of wildlife to watch for, and recommend safe techniques for protecting you and your property.

Minimize the opportunity

Small ponds with shallow areas make fish easy prey. On the other hand, most predators will not venture into ponds where fish have room to escape or hide, making their hunt difficult or from which their own exit may be awkward.

If you are about to build an additional pond, or expand the one you have, we recommend that you build it as large and deep as possible, with steep sides. If you plan to have Koi, a depth of three to four feet is recommended. Also, because you can always elevate your plants with rocks, make plant shelves 12-16" deep so they will not be used as access points by predators.

Always locate your pond where you can observe it from a window, and have a light ready to illuminate it at the flip of a switch.

Deter the predators that pose the greatest threat

We hope you will agree that control of predators is preferable to their eradication. Fortunately, you have many effective options:

Netting – Covering your pond with netting, particularly at night, when predators are most active, is an excellent way to protect your pond. Netting can also be used seasonally, for example, during spring and fall when animals are most active.

Alarms – The Critter Gitter, a small electronic device, detects animals moving into its protected area, then emits a high pitched sound and flashing lights to send them fleeing. For nighttime control, you can install motion sensors to trigger your exterior or pond lighting system.

Fencing – If you expect frequent visits from predators, you may need electric fencing immediately surrounding your pond. Electric fencing is easy to install and will deter most non-flying predators. Zoning laws in some areas require a fence to be placed around a pond to prevent access by young children.

Water deterrents – The Scarecrow is a highly effective, battery operated device designed to keep predators of all types away. If its sensor detects movement, the Scarecrow shoots a 3-second blast of water over a wide radius, startling the trespasser. It can be easily "hidden" behind a plant or bush. The Deer Scarer Bamboo Spitter, a decorative fountain, adds the sound of trickling water and movement to your pond. It fills slowly, and then empties with a distinctive "clack" that wards off deer and

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other animals.

Decoys – Some predators like herons are territorial and will not intrude on an area they perceive as already dominated by one of their kind. Others simply will not risk attack from a natural rival like a snake or owl, or even an alligator. These are all available as decoys and work very well. For optimum effect, they need to be moved about frequently so that predators do not catch on.

Alternative food and water – If you feed wildlife, placement of feeders and waterers at the opposite side of your property can draw predators away from your pond.

Repellents – Spray repellents use smell and taste to ward off predators like deer, squirrels and raccoons. They are very versatile because they can be applied wherever you desire. For best results, they should be renewed at intervals or after rain.

Hiding places – Predators cannot eat your fish if they cannot catch them. Make sure your pond has plenty of floating vegetation for your fish to hide under, and enough structure to dive below. Sections of wide diameter black PVC tubing can be placed inconspicuously on the bottom of your pond. These have the added advantage of providing good habitat for your fish. If you encounter an agile predator like an otter, consider a fish refuge, which is a hard mesh cage that allows fish in but keeps predators out.

Trapping – For the most part, we do not recommend trapping. It can bring you face-to-face with animals that spend their entire life trying to keep a safe distance, and compel them to use their sharp claws in defense. Relocation of trapped animals is difficult and dangerous, and sometimes illegal. Instead, if you must trap and relocate a large predator, we recommend seeking out a licensed professional service.

Do not wait to experience a loss. Predator proof your pond today.

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