



PondScapes Atlanta



WILDLIFE AND YOUR POND

As you might expect, a beautiful pond with clean aerated water attracts an amazing amount of wildlife. Some are just passing through, some are regular visitors, and some take up permanent residence! We will discuss what can be done to entice even more wildlife to visit your pond, and provide some interesting background information on lots of animals. However, sometimes wildlife is not what people are after. If you are looking for ways to keep a few pesky critters out of your pond see our other article – Unwelcome Visitors.

The word spreads fast in the animal kingdom. Put in a pond, and you'll agree. Within days, a whole array of creatures find their way into, next to, and around your pond. As you settle into your new pond so do countless insects, amphibians, birds, and reptiles. The reason your pond attracts so many creatures is because a steady supply of clean water can be hard to find. While some creatures spend part of their life cycle in the water, some are just looking for a drink.

Insects are perhaps the most interesting of all pond inhabitants (including the fish). Aquatic insects use a variety of habitats within your pond, some like fast flowing water from a waterfall, others prefer hiding under rocks or in the plants. They really don't need much, a little flowing water and some plant cover go a long way. Adding some submerged rocks can help too. Having insects in your pond is a sign of a healthy ecosystem.

The most notable insect is the dragonfly. Dragonflies are astounding with their aerial acrobatics and incredible colors. A dragonfly at rest will have two sets of wings held out to the side, one placed after the other from head to tail. Generally, dragonflies are two to three inches long. These insects are keyed into water because that's where they grow up. Dragonflies start out underwater as nymphs. These nymphs are quite extraordinary, I'm certain a few alien movies used them as models! The nymph lives in the water for several years catching other insects (often mosquito larvae!) and sometimes very small fish. Eventually the nymph is ready to spread its wings, and much like a butterfly it molts its skin and emerges as an adult dragonfly. In the adult stage the dragonfly continues its onslaught on other insects, including mosquitoes.

Damselflies are another insect commonly seen near water. Damselflies are closely related to dragonflies and look very similar, except the wings are usually held closed (together) above the body. Damselflies are not quite the strong fliers as their cousins, often fluttering similarly to a butterfly.

Water striders (water skimmers) can move in very quickly as well. Often these guys are on a new plant that gets introduced to the pond. The water striders have adapted to live in the surface film of the water. Special appendages are designed to keep the strider above the water. In a big pond a bunch of these guys can be quite entertaining.

To increase the appeal of your pond to insects, you need to make sure they have adequate hiding and feeding places. Lots of plants and rocks will provide areas for insects to hide and rest. Remember most insects are at the bottom of the food chain and without good places to hide will not last for long! Many insects feed on plant materials both alive and dead. So resist the temptation to keep your pond 100% clean. Leave some leaves for the insects to eat and hide under.

Frogs are one of the favorites. In the Southeastern U.S. over twenty-five types of frogs and toads can be found. Toads are a 'hop-by' guest – they will use the water to spawn in, and usually leave shortly thereafter. Their tadpoles (pollywogs) are quite small when they hatch out, pencil eraser size or smaller. Frogs are divided into two types – aquatic and terrestrial. The aquatic frogs stay in the water, or just next to the pond. These are the ones that leap into the pond when you walk by. Terrestrial (tree) frogs usually live in trees and shrubs and use the pond, like toads, only to spawn in. Aquatic frogs will spawn in the water too, and the tadpoles are much larger, and grow much more quickly. I have seen bullfrog tadpoles that would give a goldfish nightmares. All tadpoles are herbivorous, and can be a great help in reducing unwanted algae growth.

Most tadpoles don't do well with fish. Most fish (even goldfish) will eat frog eggs and small tadpoles. This is true for most of the other smaller critters in the pond like insects and salamanders. Some adult frogs protect themselves from fish with mild poisons in their skin that make them untasty! Others just grow too large to be eaten. Aquatic frogs will take up permanent residence quite quickly. Depending on the size of the pond up to ten or even more individual frogs will live in your pond. Because certain frog types are more tolerant of fish than others, the number and types of frogs found around you pond will vary depending on your pond. See the web links below for more information about each species. Areas of shallow water and plants around the edge and in the water make ponds more attractive to frogs. Frogs must be wary of predators like herons, cats, and raccoons. Hiding places near the waters edge will allow the frogs to quickly dive into the water when danger threatens. During spring when frogs and toads are mating and laying eggs, they need areas to hide and rest and lots of plants to attach their eggs to. Tree frogs need bushes and shrubs near the pond where they can sit and sing their songs to attract the "ladies"!!

Salamanders are another guest to many ponds. These guys look like lizards, but are not covered in scales like a lizard. Like frogs, salamanders require water to reproduce. However, most salamanders are small and quickly become fish food. Salamanders rarely do well in ponds with fish. These creatures are seldom seen by pond owners because they are nocturnal (active only at night).

Another interesting critter that occasionally moves in on its own is the turtle. Rarely, a turtle will find its way into a pond. Usually they have to be put there, and usually they will walk

right on out. Most turtles are very shy and have a bad habit of getting up and moving out when they realize people are around. To discourage this a steep sided pond is necessary. Liner ponds are a risk with the turtles' claws, so a concrete pond or rock lined pond would be better than bare liner. If you are interested in keeping turtles, I would recommend you do some research, they have some very important requirements that must be met for them to do well. Most turtles readily eat fish food, and can be trained to do so. But, be warned most turtles are carnivores and would love nothing more than to eat your fish. If you want a turtle, be sure it is small and your fish are large and fast!

Snakes sometimes move into a pond too. I know what you're thinking – snakes are baddies and need to be removed. Well the only thing I've ever seen a snake do at a pond is scare the homeowners and their dogs, and eat a few small fish. Water snakes don't usually get big enough to eat fish over six inches, and as it happens most of the prize fish are well over this length, and are in no danger. I have NEVER seen a venomous snake in a backyard pond, and I don't expect I ever will. Chances are it is not a venomous snake. Everyone thinks it's a cotton mouth (also called a water moccasin) but they simply are not found in the Atlanta area. They are found in the southern part of the State and up near Rome (for more info read "Unwelcome Visitors"). Most often it's a common water snake. These guys are harmless, except for the startle they may give you as they slide into the water. If you aren't convinced that the snake is doing little or no harm, please see the article Unwelcome Visitors.

An amazing array of birds can also be regular visitors to your pond. Birds use the pond to get a drink, and bathe in. Birds absolutely love flowing water and are quickly attracted to a birdbath area incorporated into a waterfall or stone edging and can be very entertaining. All you need is a flat area just covered with gentle water (no more than one half inch deep) for the birds to stand and flutter in. You will be amazed at all the fluttering and wriggling birds!

The amount and types of wildlife attracted to your pond will depend on a variety of factors. The area your home is located in is one factor. Many of these smaller critters don't travel far. So if you are in a very urban area with no natural water areas, you may not get too many visitors. Additionally the amount of habitat in your pond will affect who comes to visit. Fish don't require much diversity. But most non-fish wildlife will require a fair amount of hiding places and alternate food sources. So the more structure (rocks and plants) and the more food sources (plants) the more wildlife you'll attract. Remember the more wild it is the more wildlife you'll get!!

Those are the most common critters that will enjoy your pond with you. Often it is the animals and nature's interaction with the pond that people find most rewarding. As we have said, a few small considerations and projects can greatly increase your pond's appeal to the surrounding wildlife. Enjoy your new friends.

Here is a great place to get more information...

Georgia Department of Natural Resources' page on Backyard Wildlife
<http://georgiawildlife.dnr.state.ga.us/content/displaynavigation.asp?TopCategory=83>

Georgia Department of Natural Resource's page on "Amphibians in Your Backyard"
<http://georgiawildlife.dnr.state.ga.us/content/displaycontent.asp?txtDocument=145>

Georgia Master Gardener's page on "Ideas for Backyard Wildlife Management"
<http://www.ces.uga.edu/agriculture/horticulture/master%20gardener/wildlife.html#FrogPond>

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