

Inland Northwest Pond Predators by Gayla Aspenleiter

Having a pond in your yard can be enjoyable and relaxing. Ponds help relieve stress from our busy lives. But ponds also attract predators so make sure you prepare for their visits. The three most prevalent predators to visit ponds in the Inland Northwest are blue herons, osprey and raccoons.

The first predator to visit our pond was the mighty blue heron. Not having ever seen a heron before, I had no idea what it was. It was standing on my neighbor's roof when I walked outside and saw it. I stared it down for what seemed like an eternity until it finally flew away.



After doing some research online, I learned that blue herons are mainly active in the mornings and at dusk. They use their long legs to wade in shallow water and use their sharp spear-like bills to catch food. They locate their food by sight and usually swallow it whole. In fact, they have been known to choke on prey that is too large. They are solitary predators and extremely territorial. They are also protected by the United States Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Because they are territorial, we added a statue of a crane/heron to the island around the streams to our pond. The statue must work as we have had no problems with herons at our pond since. Installing bird netting can also prevent herons from getting your fish if your pond is shallow. Herons will only wade in shallow water so make sure your pond is at least 3 feet deep.

The second predator to visit our pond was an osprey and he got lucky. He not only ate a couple of goldfish, but he also tried to get one of our larger koi. The osprey must have caught the koi and then dropped him back into the pond (the koi was either too big or the osprey didn't get a good grip on the koi). The osprey punctured the koi's belly and it got infected and we eventually lost him, our precious Bandit. Recently, we spotted another osprey swooping down into our pond from our neighbor's tree. This osprey grabbed one of our smaller,

two year old koi. My husband ran from the deck and yelled at the osprey to drop the fish and surprisingly, he did, right into my bird and butterfly garden! My husband rushed to pick up the fish, checked him, and then quickly put him back in the pond. The osprey circled and came back but by then we were outside waving our arms and yelling at him so he left. The koi is fine but he lost a few scales on his side.



Ospreys are unable to dive to more than about three feet below the water's surface so they gravitate towards shallow fishing grounds or prey on fish near the surface of the water. They are excellent anglers and catch a fish at least one in every four dives with success rates as high as 70 percent. Osprey, in the state of Washington, are no longer endangered or threatened, but they are state monitored.

Osprey have a wingspan of 59.1-70.9 inches so providing a barrier over the top of your pond, such as a bridge or large piece of driftwood, will deter the osprey from swooping down on your fish. Putting a net over your pond will also help. During the summer months provide an abundance of plants (we use lilies and hyacinths) in the pond to make it difficult for the osprey to see the fish.

We didn't want to use a net so we purchased three floating inner-tubes and hooked them together to keep the osprey out of the pond and so far it has worked. When we are sitting by the pond the floats are easy to remove. They allow us to still feed the fish and light is still getting to the pond plants. Once the lilies grow taller and cover the pond we will remove the floats until autumn.



The final predator to visit our pond was a raccoon. You might think they are cute and cuddly scampering through your yard but they are wearing a mask because they are a bandit out to steal your fish! Thanks goodness this bandit did not get any of our fish. However, he did help himself to some large snails living

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in the streams of our pond. He was nice enough to leave us the shells, which was how we knew it was a raccoon!

Raccoons are smart and their claws are strong enough to open clams and oysters and dig snails out of their shells. They feed on fruit, nuts, eggs and grubs to small animals such as mice, amphibians, birds, and aquatic animals. And a pond filled with fish is a sure fire-magnet for raccoons.

Raccoons don't like to swim and will only venture so far into the water, so it's critical that your pond is deep enough for the fish to find a safe haven at the bottom. Another strategy for safe fish-keeping is to include fish caves into the design of your pond. Deep shelves around the parameter of the pond will deter raccoons from dining pond-side. The depth of the pond's edge will keep the hungry critters from venturing in a few inches, and therefore they won't be able to fetch any fish. Netting your pond is also an option.

At some time, one or all three of these predators will probably find you pond. As they say, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

