

Backyard nature: Swimming serpents

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Over the last several months I have had cause to read up on vernal pools and woodland ponds, as working at home through COVID-19 left me with few places to go than besides the backyard to observe our small but deep and crystal clear pond, teeming with amphibious critters to watch.

The number of garter snakes this pond attracts was a bit alarming but I've learned that a healthy snake population is a sign of a healthy ecosystem. So I here I am, spending my leisure time watching them as I social distance, learning to appreciate them. One thinks of snakes as coiling up in the firewood pile or lingering along stonewalls. But these snakes took over our yard and our pond.



The backyard pond may look barren in early spring but it already holds enough food to keep a colony of garter snakes well fed for the whole season. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

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And goodness, can they swim.

I only occasionally see them in the pond and usually it is because they don't want to hang out with me. The one I managed to get on video was last spring, when the water was still high and too chilly for any reptile to willingly stay in for long. That snake buzzed along the water away from me at such a crazy speed it looked like a fast-forwarding VHS tape.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/TTTdvPzhYK0>

More recently I was standing at the pond's edge after a heavy rainfall. The pond was low but with the downpours and run-off feeding it the water level had quickly regained a foot. The muck at the bottom had churned the water into a dull brown, no longer could I see vegetation or salamanders, tadpoles and boatman scooting about.

Across from me, a splash. A big brown snake dove in, disappeared and resurfaced, maybe not even sure where it meant to go. But when it realized I was watching it found purpose and headed for the far end, away from me.

Because I can't seem to stop watching snakes go about their business (which usually looks like not much at all), I followed along the banking. It slowed down, tongue darting in and out to gauge my intent and distance. I stopped. It stopped – completely immobile on top of the water. I could see the movement of its breathing. How does something tread water without moving?

I cursed at myself for not having my phone on me. We were locked in a silent game of chicken, neither willing to give up. At least a minute, maybe more, passed before I heard my husband coming out of the woods on his tractor. I'd use his phone to video it swimming across the pond! When he shut off the tractor I called to him but he didn't hear me. The snake made not even a ripple this whole time.

Finally, I moved. I didn't even mean to. But the snake seized the opportunity for a get-away and dove under water. I ran in the same direction. By the time it came back up I was closer to the other end of the pond than it expected. It too sped up, disappeared under water and come back up. I beat it to the edge and waited, thinking it would head for a different safety spot.



A garter snake, heavy with young, at water's edge. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

But no, it did not retreat. It rested in the muddy cat-o-nine tails at my feet, its tail end still in the water. Suddenly, I felt sorry for it. The poor thing was probably cold and who was I to make a rainy day worse for a snake who had done nothing other than grab my attention.

By then my husband had joined me and when he reluctantly handed me his phone, the snake finally began moving, back out into the water. I hit the camera icon and started the video recorder, glad for a chance to capture the moment. It dove again and returned to the edge about 20 feet away, slipping into the weeds and ferns on the banking. I replayed my video....nothing. It had not recorded for even a second. I was so disappointed I thought about trying to root it out of hiding for a second take. But my conscience (also known as a spouse) told me to leave him alone.

A week later the two of us (the spouse, not the snake) were walking along the banking around the pond. The weather had been so dry we hadn't needed to mow and wild grape vines were starting to intrude across the grass. Prime cover for snakes. I was about to point out where I had seen a young one earlier and suddenly my husband grabbed my hand and yelled "hey!"

Looking for a tiny snake, I almost stepped on a mother of a snake. And I mean, a mother of a snake. She slithered down over a rotted stump towards the water. (The same stump where I saw a yellow-spotted salamander temporarily escape the jaws of a snake one night – maybe the same snake too?) This time I had my phone and I got a picture of the fattest snake I will probably ever see. And when she saw we weren't going anywhere, she lit into the water, swimming just out of reach (like I'd ever actually grab a snake). She had to be close to four feet long, carrying dozens of live babies in her bulging belly.

Satisfied with my 15 seconds of footage, which I've watched in fascination dozens of times, we left her alone along the edge of the pond. But I walk by that spot several times a day, hoping to get pictures of one of her slithery little offspring as they stake out their own claims in our backyard ecosystem.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/3D9JloaiPc>

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