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Ponds impound more than water
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Everyone likes a swimming pond.

A couple of willows weep majestically. Spring Peepers put on their heavy-metal show at night, keeping the old folks up and giving the young ones the wrong idea. It's a slowed-down place where cell phones should be banned, and no one yells at the dogs when they get filthy.

Nothing is better after a long day of trimming hedges or trading them than jumping in. The deeper down, the colder and lonelier it is, which is like a lot of things in life.

Ponds are smaller than lakes. In most places, a pond is fewer than five or ten acres.

In curmudgeonly New England, many lakes are called ponds. The most famous is Walden's 61 acres in Concord, Ma., where Henry David Thoreau camped out about two miles from his Mom's kitchen. New England is also the place where seashore mansions are called cottages, and old fortunes are not called anything at all.

Ponds confine water. This happens in natural holes, like those left by glaciers as they fled north taking tons of souvenir rocks with them, or by building a dam that impounds water. All dams fail eventually.

Farm ponds are, by nature, opaque. It's hard to know what's down there, especially on the bottom.

If you need to see your toes at all times, stick to chlorinated pools. The bottom is not where you want to touch, even a toe. This, too, is a lot like life.

Ponds are alive. Fill a hole with water, and life will come.

The biggest presence may be blue-green algae -- a bacterium that forms dense surface mats in the summer. You can kill this mess with a cup or two of copper sulfate. Or you can drag it onto shore with a long-handled, four-tined potato hoe, which gives you tendonitis after a ton or two. I'm a copper-sulfate man these days.

In no particular order of distaste, ponds bring frogs, water snakes, bugs, muskrats and snapping turtles. The last two deserve special condemnation.

Muskrats turn pond embankments into Swiss cheese. Water escapes through the holes, runs around and gets in trouble. Muskrats appear to have a need to destroy the very neighborhood that gives them a living, sort of like crack dealers.

Belgium and the Netherlands consider them -- muskrats -- pests, because they destroy dikes and levees. On muskrats, I'm down with the Low Countries brothers.

Snapping turtles are big, mean-tempered, dangerous creatures with small brains and fast bites. They spend much of their time buried in mud at the bottom of my pond. The consensus opinion seems to be that they are docile in water unless, of course, you step on one—another reason not to touch bottom.

Certain individuals, who I suspect missed a few steps in being intelligently designed, keep them as pets.

I've yet to meet a friendly snapper, or even one who was willing to agree to disagree. On land they will attack even if you are not trying to chop off their heads, which is the locally preferred channel for inter-species communication.

Ponds host weirdo visitors, such as Great Blue Herons who stand motionless in the shallows like demented descendants of 19th Century fanatics trying to remember their cause.

Ponds are alive with the sounds of...sex, mostly. The male frogs boast and bellow. It's as bad as high school. Courtship is no mere formality; actually, it is no mere anything. The girls, I think, have given up on "Friends first."

Ponds are self-destructive. They attract dirt, which replaces water and degrades any dive-from-the-dock experience.

They are expensive to build...and rebuild. The more dirt moved, the higher the cost.

I spent more than \$5,000 two years ago to reconstruct a silted-up, half-acre pond next to the house, install an overflow pipe and build a dock that Sophie and Lucy, our Yellow Labs, use for shaking water onto me and my newspaper. They don't consider a full-body shake worth the effort unless I participate. Their other favorite activity is shaking off while standing in water above their ears. Neither rocked the reasoning section of the SAT.

Sometimes you can trade for a pond. An excavation contractor might "scoop you out" a run-off-fed pond in a low spot in exchange for the dirt he needs.

Like everything else these days, ponds need to be more complicated than they look. Many ponds need to be engineered, not just dug out on a Saturday afternoon with a backhoe and a six pack. Everything has to be sized correctly for the amount of water that will be impounded. Clay soils may need to be trucked in, because they are impermeable—a useful trait when you’re trying to hold water. A good overview is available at www.acres.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1114/ANR-1114.pdf.

If five or more acres are disturbed during construction, the owner needs to get a National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permit. Big dams need state permits. Where wetlands are involved, a Corps of Engineers permit may be required. Assistance may be found at the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office and from private consultants.

Land-grant universities and other public agencies provide information on pond construction, fish, pest control, fire protection, safety, livestock watering and many other aspects of farm ponds and the furtherance of western civilization.

Ponds are fun, but, like fast motorcycles, they are always dangerous. I knew two drowning victims--a little girl, skating, went through the ice, and her Dad went in after her.

Ponds always impound more than water.

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