

Cattails win first round

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Saturday morning, last.

The sun was shining. The air was still and soft. The pond creatures were silent—no peepers peeping, no ducks ducking, no frogs courting. The water was crisp, but no longer polar.

There, concealed in the middle of a jungle of eight-foot-tall cattails, I sat in two feet of sucking pond muck topped by another two feet of primordial chili. Around me, simple creatures -- with backbones and without -- jumped, slithered and gurgled while I sat, stuck.

“The smell of mud, primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils..,” as Marlow said in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.

A green slime of 10,000 frog eggs was rising to my chin.

I was sinking, slowly and inexorably. The pond’s murky bosom was pulling me in, with barely a glug-glug to mark my passing. I grabbed on to the off-chance that I might be reincarnated as a snapping turtle.

I imagined my obituary: “He was a victim of his own procrastination.”

I don't normally spend nice Saturday mornings being swallowed whole. But Nature called.

After I rebuilt our swimming pond about 10 years ago, a couple of cattails appeared the next spring near the nutrient-rich, spring-fed intake. "Oh, how picturesque," I said.

Cattails (*Typha latifolia*), common Northern Hemisphere plants that create thick stands, turn open water into marsh.

It is much easier to swim in open water than marsh.

Cattails grow to as much as 10 feet high, with a yellow spike at the top of the stalk and a brown corn dog below.

The spike is the pollen-producing male part; the corn dog -- sometimes called, the cigar -- is the seed-containing female part. In the fall, the corn dog produces a white cottony fluff of seeds for the wind to distribute while the cattail's roots slink around looking to colonize more mud.

A patch of cattails is often just one giant networked plant lying on its side in the mire with stalks sticking out of the water. I did not know back then that one charming plant could turn into 1,000 square feet of cattails gone wild.

The original pioneers settled in and multiplied. Each year, they sent their young toward the clear water in the middle of the pond where on summer afternoons the resident husband and wife occasionally frolic like porpoises. (Well, maybe, more like manatees.)

Left alone, these cattails would eventually turn my lovingly and expensively excavated, 12-foot-deep pond into a fetid bog. My job was not to leave them alone.

Cattail defenders will point out their virtues. They control erosion and provide food and cover for wildlife. They are a useful plant for

phytoremediation, the process by which vegetation absorbs pollutants -- like arsenic, lead, phosphorus and pesticides -- from water and wetlands. They can be burned as a biofuel if you can figure out an efficient way to harvest them. Parts of the cattail are edible and medicinal (assuming they're not crammed full of arsenic).

Nonetheless, I needed to fight them with every tooth and nail that I could muster.

So I broke their stalks in half. I whacked off their spikes and defiled their corn dogs. I cut them down. I pulled them up. I sprayed them with Roundup.

Nothing worked. They thrived under my care. They established a second colony on the other side of the pond a few years ago. A cattail noose was encircling our swimming hole.

I knew I should have nipped this invasion in the bud, but other projects were more insistent. And with each succeeding year of procrastination, the pond-stealing cattails gained depth, breadth and rights.

I stalled, because I knew that mixing it up with the cattails would be like Humphrey Bogart dragging the "African Queen" and Katharine Hepburn through the reed-choked, leech-infested delta.

That 1951 movie was mainly shot in the Belgian Congo, although the reed scene was filmed in Turkey.

Central Africa was a little rougher than Beverly Hills. Hepburn, who insisted on drinking water on location while Bogart and Director John Huston only drank alcohol, had to perform through bouts of dysentery as a result. On one of her frequent calls, she ran into a black mamba inhabiting the outhouse that she needed to inhabit. She also put up with soldier ants marching up her legs.

Bogart's character, Charlie Allnutt, is a Cockney in C.S. Forester's novel, but Bogie couldn't do the accent so Charlie was tricked out as an undocumented Canadian with a New York accent. Bogart won his only Academy Award for this performance.

Huston wanted to put live leeches on Bogart. He brought an English breeder and his leeches to the set, but Bogie refused to go along. Huston gave in and shot a close-up of real leeches attached to the breeder instead of Bogie.

Natives were hired to tote and fetch, but they rarely showed up. They were convinced that the Hollywood filmmakers were cannibals. Houston, who was known for fleeing Hollywood's backbiting and appetite for consuming its stars, could not allay their concerns.

Charlie Allnutt came to mind as I faced the cattails.

I dressed appropriately for my role. I wore a long-sleeved shirt, gym shorts and above-the-calf rubber muck boots. I carried a two-gallon pressurized sprayer filled with a mixture of water, surfactant and glyphosphate, a systemic herbicide that's guaranteed to kill cattails by poisoning their roots. The stuff is EPA-approved and safe for wildlife.

To spray the most distant cattails, I had to wade in to their stronghold from five different locations. Each assault started on the bank and went ever deeper into the water and an ever-muckier sloping bottom. My boots filled with frog eggs and unidentified floating objects.

Pete Seeger sang in my head that I was waist deep in the Big Muddy and the big fool said to push on.

Each forward step sunk a foot deeper into the clutching bottom and its secrets. Each step became harder and less balanced. About 10 feet from shore, I sprayed the most distant cattails.

Then I tried to turn around. At which point, nothing moved below my waist. I sat down and began to sink, less like a stone and more like a rubber ducky with a slow leak.

The muck gripped my feet, and I had little purchase for getting my sitting body back on top of my knees so that I could rise.

A lot of splashing and churning and cursing ensued.

A bemused marital observer sitting on our front porch figured I was having a great time and left for a riding lesson.

I was eyeball to eyeball with the frog eggs.

Finally, I realized that I might be able to flop up on shore the way evolutionary biologists say the first creatures came out of the oceans—by working my way over onto my belly and using my pectoral fins to walk onto land like a mudskipper.

I finished in two hours. I emerged smelling like pond scum and frog fetus. I had been attacked by two red-winged blackbird mothers who were protecting their kids. A giant dragon fly had hovered six inches away from my nose, trying to decide whether I was food or foe. It flew off, undecided.

I never had much of an appetite for corn dogs, and now I have even less.

It will take a couple of weeks to see whether the cattails have won yet another round.

In the meantime, I'll give some thought on Father's Day to Jochebed, the Hebrew mother, who so loved her infant son, Moses, that she fashioned a tiny basket boat from papyrus and set him adrift in the Nile's bulrushes to save his life. Central American mothers and fathers have set their own children adrift on the northern side of the Rio Grande in hope that they will be found, rescued and spared.

As I've gotten older, I've grown to hate procrastination in myself.

My stalling always seems to result in making the original job harder, more complicated, more aggravating and more expensive.

I plan to do something about this...down the road.

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