

AN UNWELCOME GUEST AND OTHER SPRING TALES—*Ellen Evans*

I was woken up in early March at 4:30am by a gnawing noise above me. "Oh no, rats!" I thought. I lay quietly listening for other noises and then heard this heavy walking around on our roof. Not like squirrels or cats. Big and heavy, like a person. Then I heard some noises on the patio. The motion sensor light went on. Clearly some kind of intruder was in the yard. My adrenaline surged as I tried to form a plan. Wake up Kirk, call the police, flee the house? I got out of bed and peeked out from behind the blinds with trepidation. Waddling across the deck was the most humungous raccoon I have ever seen. I had never seen a raccoon in our neighborhood before, and swore we just didn't have them in our part of the city. Based on the weights of previous pets I have had, I would estimate him at 30-40 pounds at least. I have seen beavers in the zoo and he was well larger than them, as well as other raccoons I have seen in my lifetime.

This was a very big deal, from a koi keeping perspective. Probably number one enemy of koi keepers (excluding parasites), is raccoons, followed by herons. I didn't want to scare him away yet, I wanted to see what he would do. He went over to the bamboo water return spout under the palm trees and drank out of the pond for a bit. Then he waddled over to the end of the pond where it's clear of bushes and put both his arms in the water up to his shoulders and just waited, staring into the water. Now washing his hands or anything, just waiting there patiently with his furry arms totally immersed in 55F water. He was fishing!

The fish were asleep anyway, just kind of drifting down near the bottom. I turned on the other motion sensor light and that didn't bother him, he just looked up. Then I opened the door and stepped out onto the deck and hissed at him. (Best to use language he'd understand...) He ambled back about 10 feet into the dark. Lacking anything to throw, I walked further into the backyard, hissing, and he ran up our plum tree and onto the neighbor's fence. Then he just sat on the fence waiting for me to go away. So I walked all the way back to the fence and hissed some more and he jumped into the alley. Then I looked over the fence and he was just puttering around in the alley and now a dog was barking from someone else's yard. So I hissed at him again and he bumbled off to someone else's driveway several houses away. Then I had to try and fall back asleep knowing my alarm was going to go off in an hour, with my stomach all knotted up with worry for the koi that he would come back.

I presumed that now that he had been in our neighborhood and had discovered our pond, surely he would deem it a place worth returning to. The fact that I heard him on the roof means that he climbed the arborvitae next to the front porch, got onto the roof, and clumsily descended one of the wooden poles supporting the shade roof over the patio. I intended to put our netting over the pond, possibly even reinstall our unused scarecrow squirter. But whether due to laziness or denial, I convinced myself that everything would be fine as is and made no additional protections. After all, as long as he has to enter the backyard via the roof, I will surely hear him walking around overhead before he can do any real damage, right? Plus our pond is the standard recommended greater



This timid neighborhood stray cat has adopted our backyard as her own. She drinks out of the pond but never bothers the fish. Here you see her making good use of our pond equipment.

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than three feet in depth, with no steps or ledges. So he couldn't really even catch anything, right?

Of course, immediately after I wished I had taken a picture of him for the Koi Ahoy. Because how often do you catch a raccoon in the act of fishing for koi? He didn't even care that the light was on him! It has now been five weeks and he hasn't returned. With each passing night I feel we are more and more in the clear, but my "we don't have raccoons here" bubble has certainly been burst. I still wake up at little noises, stiffen, and think, "He's back!" I keep the camera at the ready on my dresser .

In other pond news, I recently solved an ongoing mystery of ours. For years, every time Kirk cleaned the filter he noticed little wormy things living on the walls of the filter even in the filter media. We had no idea what they were. We never saw them on the fish so we ruled out any type of parasitic worm. And they did not swim around in the water like mosquito larvae, so we ruled that out as well. They seemed to come out of (or go into?) little shells or cases affixed to the walls of the filter. They use something on or near their head to move around, and can also anchor themselves with their tails. I took some close-up pictures of them on a piece of PVC that we keep in our skimmer basket. After some online searching, I have decided that they are midgefly larvae and pupae. We definitely get little clouds of gnats around the yard in the evening in summer, so presumably this is just the adult form of these little worms in our pond.

Apparently there are over 2,000 species of midgeflies, and I am not an entomologist, so I am not going to stress out over identifying exactly what kind of fly this is. From what I have read, there are biting midges (better known as no-see-ums or sand flies) and then there are non-biting midges. I have encountered the biting variety on a trip to Florida and know how bad these can be, so I am relieved that the gnats in our yard definitely are of the non-biting persuasion. Since the larvae have no adverse effects on our fish, I don't think we need to take any sort of action. In fact, supposedly fish love eating midgefly larvae, as attested to by the large number of websites that instruct fly fishermen how to make flies that resemble them. Maybe fish who aren't regularly fed pellets would be into that, but not our lazy koi. Although koi are supposed to eat insects, invertebrates, and even other small fish, our koi have never shown any such inclination. In fact, the mosquito fish in our pond also go after the koi pellets! They do enthusiastically eat any wayward garden snails that have wandered too close to the edge of the water, so I can only imagine how succulent and delicious a snail must be to be worth the effort to a well-fed koi.



I guess both the worms and the raccoon serve as reminders that even in an urban environment our ponds are their own little biosystem. We will never replicate natural ponds exactly (which is why we need filters), but our pond is also not a protected bubble for our koi, free of nature's influence. We do what we can to maintain a balanced, healthy environment for our koi in hopes that they lead long, happy lives.