

Toad in the Hole

Down the hill from the house on my father's farm was a large, empty hollow through which water drained from an adjacent farmer's field into a sinkhole. A sinkhole is a depression in the ground where the ground has subsided by water filtering through the soil and dissolving the underlying limestone. Since my dad had been a fisherman for many years he dreamed of having his own pond stocked with fish to catch for dinner from time to time. So, a year after dad bought the farm he brought in a bulldozer to build an earthen dam upstream from the sink hole. This trapped the water in the hollow and formed a large pond.

The pond filled in less than a year and my dad stocked it with catfish, bass, and blue gill. We moved from the farm after only four years, so the fish never grew large enough to make good fishing. However, other wild life took to the pond quickly and challenged my father's patience. A family of muskrats took up residence in the dam by digging holes in it. Because their tunnels would likely cause the water to seep through the dirt and wash out the dam, he was constantly on the alert to shoot any muskrats he saw with his shotgun.

Birds also carried snakes into the pond. There were many of them living around the pond and swimming in the water. As far as I knew we never had water moccasins, but there were plenty of non-poisonous snakes in the water. There were also many poisonous copperhead and rattle snakes in the surrounding woods. But the most disruptive animal associated with the pond was probably the frogs that took up residence around the shore. They tended to live at the shallow end of the pond and in tunnels dug out and abandoned by the muskrats. At night the frogs produced a racket that woke the entire household at times.

Hordes of small frogs living around the pond would make a continuous, loud din in the night and then, inexplicably, stop suddenly for no apparent reason. They would often start their chorus again, making their rasping sound for another half hour or so, and then stop again, often for the night. But, during the interval when the smaller frogs were silent, large bull frogs would bellow out their lower pitched croaking sound. From the deep sound we figured they must be at least five pounds in size.

Frog legs are great to eat, but you first have to catch them. We would occasionally go on frog hunting expeditions at night with flashlights and “frog stickers”. However, our success was always limited to moderate and small frogs. We figured the big ones must have been hiding in the grass or submerged under water or they might just be smarter than we were.

We also thought the deep sounds of the gigantic frogs may have been coming from the small frogs we could easily spot, but, that didn’t seem reasonable. The frog sounds at night were just too deep to come from such small frogs--they had to be coming from monster frogs we couldn’t see.

During the day when we thought we were close to a frog, a movement under the water would cause a sizable wave. We figured it was caused by a large frog or possibly a fish that had grown rapidly since they had been released a year earlier. That didn't seem likely either.

We never knew for sure if there were really any big frogs in the pond until the summer when my brother, Steve, decided to go frogging while he was swimming in the pond. He liked to play in the yellow mud along the bank of the pond and dig holes. He would often return to the house from swimming caked with clay.

One day he came running up to the house with a gigantic foot-long frog in each hand. He had found tunnels in the muddy bank of the pond and probed the holes until he could feel them. He reached in, grabbed them, and pulled them out of the hole by their legs. He was so excited about catching the frogs that he quickly threw them into a large box and ran back down the hill to the pond to catch another half dozen giant frogs.

When my dad returned home from work that night he helped Steve skin the frogs and prepare them for frying. We had frog legs for supper that evening just like one of the fanciest restaurants in Paris. Frog legs taste much like chicken but are more delicate.

My brother was about six when he burrowed into the tunnels and caught the frogs. I often wondered how he could stand the thought of putting his hand into those tunnels not knowing what was inside. I would have been afraid to have found a snake instead of a frog. It makes me cringe even today to think about it. Possibly he hadn't experienced enough run-ins with snakes to be afraid yet. But, he never seemed to suffer any ill effects from his adventures with Mr. Toad.