


A Paradise of Frogs

ears ago I saw a photograph of Mark Twain in his summer whites, standing beside a frog pond with a cane pole fishing rod in his hands. It was his custom, I was told, to tie strips of meat to the end of a line and feed his bullfrogs for entertainment on summer afternoons. The image haunted me for years.

The place where I now live was once a paradise of frogs. There was a fallen barn on the property and an old uncut lawn in back of the house with a few apple trees, backed by deep woods, complete with vernal pools. The yard, early on, was characterized mainly by amphibians. Wherever I walked, it seemed that something cold-blooded was hopping out of the way, either a toad, a wood frog, or sometimes a green frog. I used to keep the pasture grasses down with a scythe, and, nearly every other swing, sleek-bodied pickerel frogs would execute fantastic crisscrossing leaps to escape. I once found a gray treefrog in a hole in one of the old apple trees while I was out scything, and, sometimes, after long rainy spells in spring, we would find frogs inside the very house—wood frogs in the cellar, spring peepers in the kitchen, and, once, a gray treefrog on the dining room window.

Slowly, in the perhaps mistaken course of gentrification of these grounds, I began mowing the lawn and digging in flower beds and cleaning up the fallen barn and the assorted detritus that had collected there ever since the old farmer who once owned this place went to his reward. The constant annual scything of the grasses under the apple trees finally evicted the poison ivy and the multiflora rose and the blackberry. But the pickerel frogs also departed. Toads no longer hopped out of the way on hot summer nights when you crossed a stone terrace in the back of the house, and I rarely saw any frogs on my lawn. What's worse, development began creeping into the former fields and woods around the house, and, sadly, year by year, the spring peeper chorus diminished, and I heard less and less of the beautiful birdlike trilling of the gray treefrogs.

Part of this may have been a sign of the general worldwide decline in frog

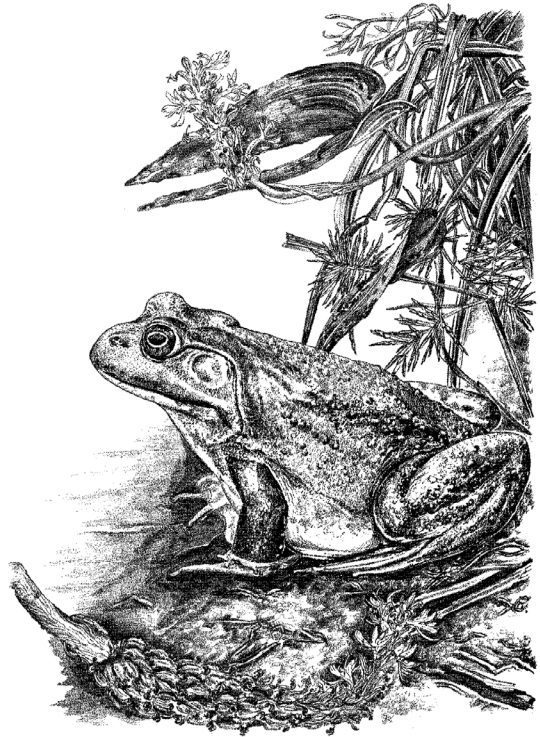
populations, but I considered that, at least around my property, it was probably all my own handiwork and that my cleaning up projects had forced them out. As a result, some years ago, I started to do something to try to bring them back.

My first act was to dig a frog pond under the apple trees. This was just a shallow, scooped-out area that I lined with concrete. I dug the pond in March, let the concrete set, and then filled it on a rainy day in early April. The next morning I looked out from the back porch and saw a toad sitting on a rock I had placed in a shallow end. Unfortunately, within a week the frog pond began to drain itself. I filled it again, and it leaked out

once more. I bought sealer and painted the bottom to no avail, and in the end I had to go out and buy one of those little pre-made fishponds. To disguise its inherent ugliness, I gave this liner a skim coat of cement and then filled it. A week later, no fewer than three green frogs moved in.

Inspired by this, I dug out another small pond farther from the house and put in another pre-made fishpond someone had given me. Within a few days, more green frogs took up residence, and, at the end of the summer, a fine pickerel frog settled there, along with a fat bullfrog.

I had no illusions that a single backyard frog pond, or for that matter



10,000 backyard frog ponds spread out across the suburbs of America, would do anything to halt habitat destruction or the mysterious worldwide decline of frogs. The fact is, I like frogs. I like to have them around. My pond projects were not that much different from maintaining a backyard bird feeder.

To further encourage my frogs, I stopped mowing grass with a lawn mower and resumed scything. With the poison ivy evicted from the grounds under the apple trees, I allowed the grasses to grow all season, save for one or two cuts to keep the woody plants out. I let weeds take over former garden patches and allowed brush to grow along the back walls. I built several little toolsheds that were intended not necessarily for tools but to serve as hiding places for mice and snakes, and eves for nesting birds, and a sanctuary for toads to hide underneath in the heat of the day. And, finally, although it's not yet complete, I began digging out a larger, deeper frog pond just beyond the apple trees.

My hope is that someday I will attract a permanent bullfrog population. And then in summer, I shall dress in a white suit, tie meat strips to a fishing line, and spend the rest of my days feeding frogs.

May/June 1999