

WILDLIFE IN THE GARDEN

by Timothy W. Grendon

Timothy Grendon was senior gardener at the Seattle Japanese Garden from April 1982 until May 1989.

Dirty Harry stands in the chilly shallows along the stone cape almost frozen with the intensity of his hunt. His long neck is fully extended and his eyes pierce bare branch reflections in search of movement, of food. All is still and his belly remains empty: it is winter in the Japanese Garden.

The thirty koi school in suspended animation in a deep pool near the samurai stone, frogs rest silently under a skim of ice in the harbor, and all five of the turtles are muddled-in for the season. A woodpecker hammers out his hunger in a rat-a-tat time on an old big leaf maple and the great heron-fed up, but not fed-emits an eerie squawk and flaps skyward to find his meal elsewhere.

The heron returns to the Japanese Garden in the spring and his shadow over the lake brings an instinctive fear to the myriad of water life newly awakened by the sun's warming. The Japanese Garden is a place of feasting for many creatures of the wing and Harry must compete with kingfishers, green herons, and bitterns for the frogs, tadpoles, koi, perch, crayfish, and baby turtles that live in the lake. Harry, and his kin who were raised in a fir tree in the arboretum stand apart from the other hunters as the only threat to the larger koi. They have been put on the welcome-only-in-winter list. He attained this status by eating a beautiful black, white, and metallic silver koi. A gardener who was pruning in a willow tree witnessed the dire deed.

"Please stay off the moss." Ha! Robins and red-shafted flickers dig in the moist green carpet, hunting for bugs and worms to feed their hungry young. Squirrels scamper about ferreting out acorns and stripping shaggy bark off the *Cryptomeria japonica* to line their nests. Flocks of grosbeaks rest for a day and varied thrushes pick about, feeding before journeying on.

Keeping an eye on all the activity of spring and ready to charge at any perceived threat is a large Canada goose. He protects his mate and the eggs she laid in a nest of feathers and shredded moss on Turtle Island. Unfazed by the geese, the frogs laze on the mossy island warming in the sun and singing for mates. Soon there will masses of eggs, tadpoles, and much thrumping vocal splendor. The koi will feast on frog eggs and then, thrashing about in a colorful roil, lay their own amid the watery roots of willow and juniper.

Tadpoles and little koi. Summer. The raucous call of the kingfisher and the silent, lily pad steps of the green heron come to the garden. Violet green swallows perform their aerial ballet above the lake, a dining dance that mosquitoes, midges, and dragonflies will not survive. Frogs sit ass.tones among the shore reeds, waiting for just the right fly. Wet footprints on the bridge mark the crossing of masked bandits who came crayfish hunting in the night. A feral cat scoots furtively through the orchard ignoring calls of "kitty, kitty."

Two goslings have hatched and rapidly grown to near the size of their father who has mellowed somewhat, not that the nest has been abandoned. The gardeners are eagerly awaiting the day that parents and young fly away taking their less-than-tidy habits with them. Gramps, an old one-eyed bullfrog, sits in the wet grass at the edge of the water and tolerated a gentle finger petting. He arches his back and closes his good eye. Frog ecstasy! Gramps likes quiet children and, sharing this preference with other animals, serves as a good reason for no running, no yelling.

Autumn will arrive red-yellow-orange around the lake, symbolic warmth for the bittern feeding among the cool roots of water iris. The fish move more slowly now, easing into their winter stillness. Buffleheads and mergansers paddle through mirrored foliage and dive for a meal of crayfish and koi. Cedar waxwings flit about the mountainside eating mountain ash and salal berries, fattening up for the winter ahead. A younger version of Dirty Harry will wing over the lake. The seasons pass and the sleeping, feeding, breeding tale begins anew for the animals of the Japanese Garden.