

Heron Marauders of Tideman Johnson

THERE IS ONE SUMMER the herons in these parts still talk about. It was in the early days of the restoration of Johnson Creek, before there was a formal watershed council and the memory of Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services as a sewerage agency was still fresh in the minds of bureaucrats. As citizens, all we knew was that we wanted to get salmon back into the watershed. There was the welcome wagon approach: restore it and they will come, but it felt like naturopathic medicine to us—holistic but slow. So for a while we went with introducing hatchery stock. On Tideman Johnson farm, across from the park, the Friends of Tideman Johnson Park built a hatch box,



and Dennis Wise with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife brought eggs and sometimes fingerlings. The herons remember the fingerlings.

One day, we had a Boy Scout troop helping us move four- to six-inch coho into a small pond we called the storage brook. The small fish were not to go into the bigger pond because there was no tree cover, the water was warmer, and there was no way for them to get to the main stem of the creek. But you know . . . those scouts wanted to put some in the bigger pond. They put in four or five hundred before we stopped them. Within days the word went out. Sometimes I had as many as four great blue herons walking the pond. Talk about easy pickings! I came home one day when a heron, we'll call him Zeke, had a big coho stuck in his neck and couldn't fly. I sat in the car listening to *A Prairie Home Companion* so he could digest his lunch in safety.

With the narrow, long, and colder pond that ran in front of my house, we had a different problem. We stocked it with thousands of fingerlings. Green herons immediately discovered this treasure trove. I sat on my deck and watched them. They would sit on branches, quietly dive down, and snag a fish. Over and over. The only thing in the way of their feast was gorging. If they ate too much they would literally fall off the branch. So I decided to stake down a gigantic web of black nylon over the entire pond. Again, I watched from my deck. No problem, if you're a green heron. You just fly down onto the netting, which then falls below the water surface, snag a fish and fly back to your branch.

Okay, so I pulled the netting tight, staking it down at multiple points until it was as taut as a trampoline. And then I waited. And waited. Finally, a green heron leaped from a branch—pond bound—and to his surprise the black netting didn't give. He bounced off the webbing and flew back to his branch, pondering what had gone wrong. I carefully circled around in back of him. He was lost in thought, and I was able to get within shouting range, and said, "Gotcha!" We had one of those interspecies moments. Eye contact. Then he flew away. I knew it was a pyrrhic victory. He would be back.

Many of the salmon in the storage brook did escape to the main creek, but the green herons feasted all summer. By summer's end, all salmon but one were gone.

By Steve Johnson, illustration by Virginia Church