

## The Backyard Creek

A number of years ago I built a small recirculating stream or “creek” on a slight slope in our backyard. There were several reasons for wanting this rather than a bird bath. First, I wanted to have the sound of running and/or dripping water as that attracts birds. I wanted it at ground level to make it available to small animals, and I wanted it in an open area without any bushes or tall wildflowers so the birds would be able to see any predators approaching. And I wanted it to be able to fill automatically in times when we were not at home.

At the top I dug out a very shallow, saucer-shaped “pool” and then a long, shallow “creek” about 6 or 7 feet long. At the bottom I dug a hole about a foot deep and two feet in diameter. All of this was then lined with a single piece of heavy-duty black plastic sheeting. I then placed a heavy rubber “tub” in the hole at the bottom.

Inside the “tub” was placed a float valve and a small submersible pool pump inside a mesh bag with foam filter material. At the top around the small pool were stacked several large rocks in such a way as to make a support for a very large rock that would hang over the pool. Then the entire area around the pool and the creek was covered with rocks to hide and hold down the plastic sheeting and large gravel was placed in the pool and the creek.

A small water line was connected to the float valve and it was adjusted to maintain the tub nearly full. The outlet from the pump was connected to ½ inch plastic tubing which was buried under the plastic sheeting up to and up on the very large rock above the pool. The top of the tub was covered with several large flat rocks to prevent any animals from having access.

So the water circulates from the tub up to the top of the big rock, falls down into the shallow pool and then runs down the “creek” and back into the tub. The water running down the “creek” is not more than about ½ inch deep and about 2 to 3 inches wide. There is a shallow depression in the large rock at the top that has water running through it as well.

The creek runs unattended for months at a time. I usually clean out debris that accumulates in the tub about every 3 months.

What we noticed almost immediately was a significant increase in the number of birds and the number of species coming to our yard. Putting out seeds only attracts seed-eating birds, but all birds need water to drink and like to bathe.

We commonly see dozens of species, from hummingbirds to turkeys drinking or bathing in our creek. The hummingbirds like to bathe in the thin film of water flowing over the

top rock, but most birds use the creek part most often, sometimes coming in small flocks bathing all at once. There is a tree with limbs not too high up not far from the creek and the birds obviously like to fly to the tree first in order to scout the area for predators and to then drop down in safety. Then they can fly up to the tree again with wet wings safely.

We have also had numerous small animals visit occasionally, including raccoons, skunks, opossums, foxes and rabbits. Squirrels are seen using the creek several times a day.

After having the creek a couple of years, we began to hear frogs croaking from underneath the rocks over the tub. It turns out that we had Leopard frogs (presumably Rio Grande Leopard frogs—*Rana berlandieri*), even though we are over a half mile from any semi-permanent water! How they got here and how they found the creek is a mystery to me. We still have the frogs. When I last cleaned the tub in the first week of January, I found four frogs and at least one tadpole living in the tub and under the rocks around it.

There is no question that the creek makes life more enjoyable for us as we never tire of seeing and watching wildlife, even if it is around an artificial creek.

Until next time...

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