

Building the Perfect Gar Pond

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I've always liked gars, but two gar species, longnose and alligator, just won't stay small enough for indoor aquaria. And I've seen many a koi and goldfish pond, but these fish are just too "bread and butter" for my tastes. Gars are much more interesting as far as I'm concerned. And perhaps I can learn more about their habits by watching them closely in a captive environment that's big enough to allow them to be gars. So I built a "gar-sized" pond.

Construction

I modeled my gar pond after the Mississippi River, with a main channel and shallow flats. It took two of us seven hours with shovels to dig the hole to accommodate the liner, which for this pond is a rubber sheet, specifically the kind that's used for flat roofs. It's nearly indestructible, easy to work with, and less expensive than comparable commercial liners. However, rubber sheets do require a little more prep work, as the talc that keeps it from sticking together needs to be scrubbed off.

The pond is 32' x 14' and holds 3600 gallons of water (Fig. 1). While the pond was filling, we adjusted the placement of the liner as needed. Sand and gravel substrates and rock work were also added at this time.

I use an 1800 gallon/hour pump to circulate water throughout the pond. Attached to the pump is 1.25-inch corrugated black hose, which is hidden by rock. The pump is near the deep end of the pond but only about half way down the side. The deep hole near the pump provides a cool area in the summer and a warm area in the winter.

I've picked up several interesting plants while fishing and placed them in the pond. I also added driftwood and a dead tree to simulate a Mississippi River biotope. In addition, I


created sandstone "bluffs" like those found on the upper Mississippi, and various flats on which minnows can spawn.

Several days after the pond was filled I introduced various fishes (many of them geographically incorrect for a Mississippi River biotope), including various sunfish and minnow species. Two weeks later, I added the gars (one 'gator, one spotted, one shortnose, one Florida) and two bowfins.

Observations

During the hottest parts of the year the gars were very active, snapping up minnows that strayed from their schools. The gars also ate dead minnows that floated by in the current. In the early evening the gar come out of the deep, dark hole, cruising up the channel and into the flats. There they would slowly herd the minnows towards shore, and then explode in a frenzy of feeding.

One time I noticed the alligator gar "baiting" sunfish. I was feeding chopped nightcrawlers to my sunnies—dollar, green, and orangespotted. They were picking at the bits when suddenly they all disappeared into the weeds. I looked and there was Old 'Gator, as I called him, slinking in from out of the channel. I thought he was hungry for worms, but I was wrong. He ignored the writhing worm chunks, waiting, motionless as a log. Soon a small sunfish resumed feeding. WHAM! Old 'Gator grabbed it and slid back into the depths. He appeared several times and snapped up several sunnies, missing the dollar sunfish (thankfully), but getting the orangespot.

When the water cooled in the fall, the gars stayed in the deep pools, except to bask on sunny days or to quickly take a gulp of air. In winter I believe they lie in the six-foot hole, waiting for the water to warm again. 

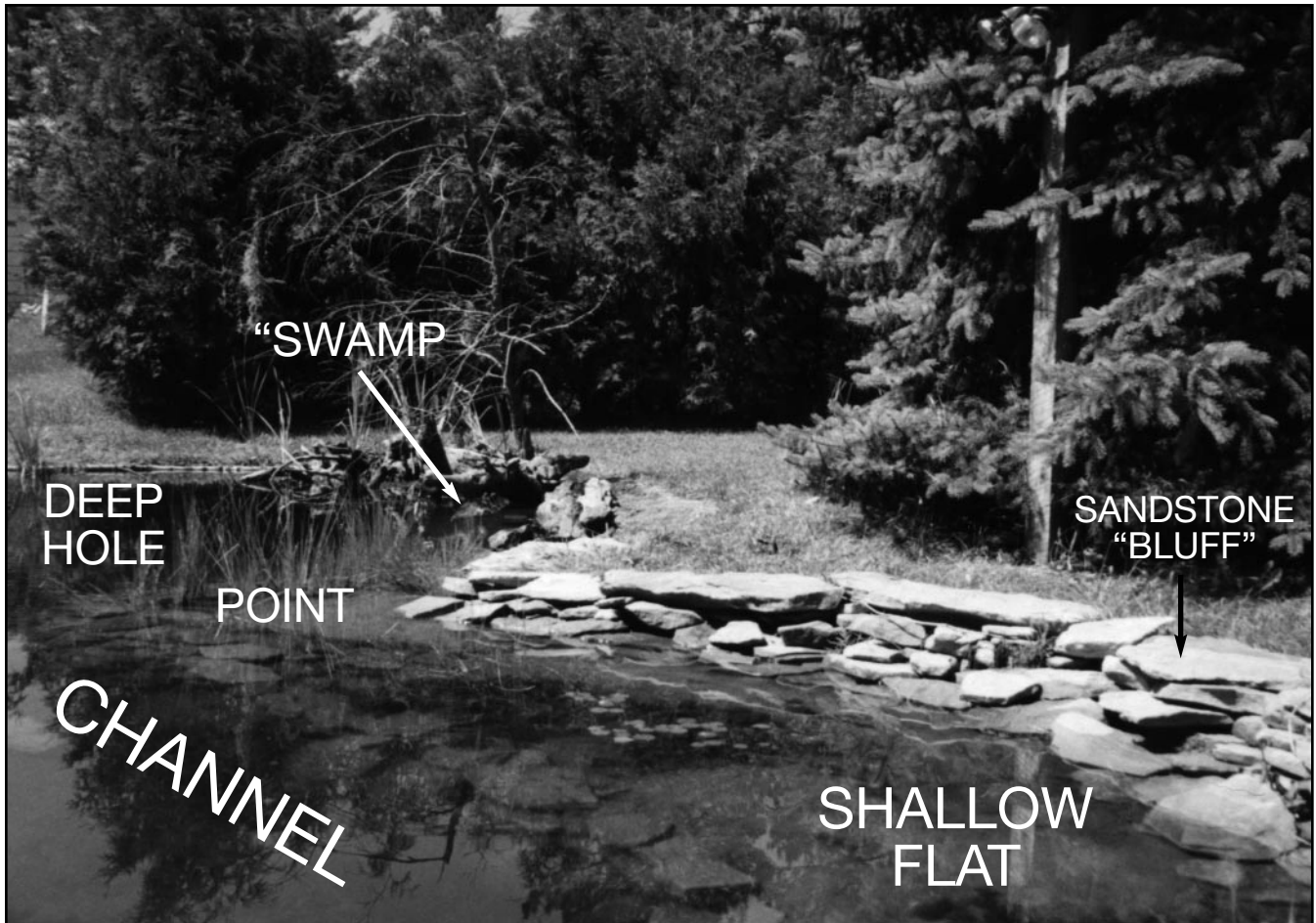


Fig. 1. R.W. Wolff's "gar" pond. Dimensions: 22' x 14'. Capacity: 3600 gallons.

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