

## A Stream Reborn

By Tom Pelton

**I**n Baltimore, a city of row houses, a stream called the Stony Run nourishes a cathedral of trees. The creek runs near my front porch and is the heart of my neighborhood. The gnarled roots of sycamores dangle into the waters like the fingers of old men. My daughters run down to the stream after school to mold cats from the clay. Acres of lush parkland fringe the waterway—creating an oasis of peace amid the racket and violence of urban life.

The river is a gathering place for families, many of whom decided to raise their children here because of the park. So when Baltimore launched a massive project to rebuild the Stony Run three years ago, many neighbors were outraged. Why fix what is good? The project required cutting down more than 150 trees and bulldozing the creek to flatten its banks and armor the shores with lines of boulders. The goal was to reduce erosion and cut down on the amount of sediment flowing downstream into Baltimore Harbor.

In late 2006, the rebuilding was done—and the stream looked awful. But then something miraculous happened. The pools of water formed by the new dams became breeding grounds for thousands of green frogs, bull frogs, and American toads. Their singing grew to a boisterous bayou chorus. My daughters forgot about



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Typically deep-woods creatures, barred owls were attracted to the new crayfish population in Baltimore's rebuilt Stony Run.

their lost clay mines in their scramble to catch frogs on the riverbanks. Hardy little fish called black-nosed dace darted between the rocks. Before the project, the stream was pretty but dead. Today, the stream remains attractive, as the contractors spared many of the grand old sycamores. And now the creek swarms

The construction can look messy, at first—and often these programs don't have enough money to go as far as they should. For example, the Stony Run project didn't do anything to stop polluted runoff that, during rainfalls, gushes into the stream from nearby parking lots. These lots could also be rebuilt, so they absorb rain instead of funneling it into the creek.

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with crayfish the size of small lobsters. As I walk among the newly planted trees along the resurrected creek, I can see crayfish shoot like volleys of arrows beneath the glassy water.

The rebuilding of streams like this has been happening increasingly across the Chesapeake Bay region over the last two decades—and this is only one kind of restoration project. Environmental restoration efforts also include planting strips of trees along creeks on farms, as well as building oyster beds and wetlands. These projects have the potential not only to multiply wildlife—which I witnessed—but also to improve water quality and create jobs during a time of recession.

But even when restoration projects are limited, they can spark the unexpected and magical. For example, at 5 a.m. one morning, I awoke in a cold sweat to hear what sounded like insane monkeys shrieking from the treetops outside my bedroom window. As it turned out, the bizarre sounds came from barred owls. The predators normally live in the deep forest, but they had moved to the city to prey on the crayfish in the rebuilt Stony Run. My wife was on the hammock on our porch when a large barred owl swooped down, perched on a branch and stared at her like a character from a Harry Potter movie. We've adopted the owl as our familiar, and as a symbol of our stream's rebirth. ✦



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