

Back to the Beavers

Last November I promised the readers of this column that there would be no columns about beavers until April. I have largely kept my word, though I suppose I have mentioned the beaver a couple of times. I continued to visit them in their brand new pond until December 12. After that the ice was too thick for the beavers to come out, and though they remained active all winter, our regular visits took a hiatus for the season. I often wondered how they were faring in their watery world beneath the ice and snow. Would they have enough branches cached to last them the whole winter?

One day in February, a day or two after a significant snowfall, I paused on a ski expedition to visit their lodge. When I saw the smooth dome of snow covering it, I felt despair. The way I recognize inhabited lodges in the winter is by the vent melted in the top by all of that beaver heat. What could have happened to this little beaver family? After a minute of pondering possibilities, I mustered my courage and knocked the snow from the top of the lodge. Beneath the thin surface of the dome I found a chamber lined with ice crystals. They just hadn't melted away all of the fresh snow yet! When I put my ear to the top of the lodge I could hear the rustlings of inhabitants.

By March 11, I decided that the streams flowing into surprise pond might have melted enough ice so the beavers could enjoy some fresh air and refill their larder. I skied down for a visit. I wondered what sort of reception I would have after three months away. As I made my noisy approach, a beaver dove into a hole in the ice next to a tree trunk. I found a seat on the steep snow bank above the stream. I packed down a little platform at the edge of the water, just in case a beaver wanted to visit, and then sat at the top of the steep snowbank above it. Oh, yes, and I left a few beaver treats on the platform.

Within ten minutes a beaver swam over near me, discovered a hemlock branch, and began chewing the bark off. I recognized the youthful Bunchberry, the beaver who was so aloof most of last summer. In another ten minutes a second beaver emerged from beneath the ice. Willow, the colony's matriarch, swam by me once, and then approached. She hadn't forgotten me or my beaver cookies. Soon her dripping bulk is on my platform, and she is resting on her elbows nibbling nuggets. Bunchberry remembered beaver cookies, too! Alas, the platform was only big enough for one beaver. As Bunchie tried to scabble up



Bunchberry enjoys an apple

the steep bank, her paws grabbing fistfuls of the loose corn snow, the bank would give way beneath her and she'd plop back into the stream.

When her mother had eaten enough, Bunchberry climbed up and had a snack, too.

I managed four more visits to the pond over the next couple of weeks, and each time I had a nice visit with Willow and Bunchberry. While I enjoyed their proximity, my concern for the other members of the beaver family grew. Popple, Willow's mate, had not been seen since late last summer, but I still held out some small hope that he might be around. Ducky, the baby beaver from the previous summer, had not appeared either. I wondered if such a little beaver would have a harder time making it through the winter on a diet of sticks. She would also be the one most vulnerable to predation if she ventured ashore in search of food.

On March 30, I determined to stay at the pond late enough that all the beavers would be forced to reveal themselves. By then the snow had melted enough that I could sit at one of my favorite spots, an opening where the bank slopes gently into the water, and I can see the dam and the lodge. Willow and Bunchie both swim right over, and I have one

eating on either side. What a happy evening. They both look comfortable and relaxed, and eventually wander off to groom and eat sticks elsewhere. The air is mild and still as the light fades. Venus emerges. From the opposite direction from the lodge a beaver appears. No bigger than a muskrat, I don't need any more light to recognize Ducky. Ducky! Her big sister Bunchberry swims up to her, they touch noses, and then Bunchie spins in the water and skitters across the top of the water in a series of quick, splashy undulations—beaver frolics!? She climbs up next to me and resumes eating. Ducky still isn't sure about the seated bi-ped, swims back and forth a couple of times, and then goes off after her mother.

If Popple is no longer here, will there be any babies this year? It is possible that Bunchberry is a male, and inbreeding is not uncommon in these situations. Will the beavers stay at their new pond, or return to Popple's Pond for the summer, as they did last year? Will Henry, the friendly goose return with his mate and attempt another nesting on the roof of the old beaver lodge? So many questions as the new season approaches.

—Patti Smith