

The View From Heifer Hill—September 2008

Ducky

In a spring column, I confessed that my New Year's resolution for 2008 was to make the acquaintance of a beaver. I began hiking to a beaver pond each evening to spend a couple of hours watching beavers and the other activities of the pond at dusk. By the middle of July, my beaver project had reached a stage that fulfilled my resolution requirements. Each evening Willow floated over to my pondside seat, lumbered up next to me, and settled in for a picnic. She would even rest her paws and most of her substantial bulk on my feet or knees if I put the food there. She was always alert, as rodents must be, and I had to be sure to move slowly and speak softly. When a sound from the woods startled her we would both listen attentively. When I assured her that all was well, she settled back to her meal.

I should have been content, but two mysteries tormented me: 1) Did Willow share my sense of companionship, or was I just the strange animal that sat next to her while she ate? and 2) Are there baby beavers? The first question would be difficult to answer, but surely the second was straightforward. Typical beaver colonies consist of a mated pair and their offspring from the previous two years. Three beavers occupied Popple's Pond. I assumed that nervous Willow was the progeny of the nonchalant Popple and the mysterious Bunchberry, a beaver that I had seen very little of. Surely Bunchberry had given birth to kits and this was the reason for her absence.



Beaver kits normally remain in the lodge for the first several weeks of their lives. Those not baby-sitting bring food and bedding to the kits. Each evening Popple and Willow would make a couple of trips to the north end of the pond towing small branches and tufts of sedges. They submerged with their cargo next to a mountainous section of an old dam that had been turned into a residence. I sometimes stood at a respectful distance and listened for the whining conversation of kits, but the whining of mosquitoes overpowered all other sounds.

By the end of the first week of July, I had concrete evidence of babies; as Willow strode up the bank to visit one evening I noticed an anatomical feature that had been concealed by her posture. Willow was lactating! She was the mother! Surely the babies had been born sometime in May, though. They might be more than six weeks old already. Had something befallen them? Perhaps Willow was protecting them from the strange visitor.

As the days ticked by, more doubts sprouted. Sometimes all three adult beavers were seen at once. Trips with branches continued, but less frequently. Could beavers be taking snacks to the lodge for themselves? By late July I convinced myself that young beavers were not to be.

On August first I saw no sign of the beavers on Popple's Pond, so continued upstream to their winter pond. The dam had suffered in recent heavy rains, and I found a beaver busy with repairs. It was Willow. Instead of swimming off after finishing her meal, she shuffled around me for a while looking for other things to do. She got back into the water and floated off, but soon came back. I tried to behave like a relaxed beaver and scratched my no-see-um bites. Willow watched with interest and began grooming herself. She then strolled back to where I had left her snack, cleaned up a few crumbs, and then waddled over to my side, sat up on her haunches, and gazed into my face. I lowered my face a little bit and we looked into

each other's eyes. She then ambled around in front of me, and repeated the procedure on the other side. She then grazed nearby for a while before returning to the pond.

This seemed like a partial answer to question number one; maybe Willow was beginning to take an interest in me. As I strolled happily downstream I couldn't help stopping by the nursery dam. Surely any baby beavers would have revealed themselves before now. Equally surely, the beaver that swam out from behind the old dam was quite small. It was a baby beaver! The little beaver looked at me, turned, and paddled back behind the dam. A few minutes later she floated into view again. Farther down the trail I saw Bunchberry deftly debarking a branch near the pondshore. Next to her was another miniature beaver engaged in the same activity. Two babies!

For the next two weeks Willow and Popple provided most of the beaver watching activity, though I occasionally saw the little beavers from afar. One night, Willow strolled back to the pond leaving her snack unfinished. She soon returned,

and a very cute miniature beaver bobbed at her side. Willow climbed right back to her snack seat, but the little beaver, Ducky, stopped at the shore where she commenced grazing on a salad of grasses and goldenrods. When Willow swam off, Ducky stayed. Big sister Bunchberry, swam over hastily, slapped her tail, and tried to herd the little beaver away, but apparently Ducky had outgrown minding bossy siblings. I thought the little beaver made it pretty clear she wanted to stay with the animal on the bank that made such funny noises.

New Year's resolutions are supposed to change us for the better. I'm not sure my friends and family appreciate the effect this resolution has had. Still they know where to find me. I can't go to town for the evening when it might be the night that Bunchberry decides I'm not dangerous, or that Ducky comes up for closer for mutual inspection. Besides, I'd like to have another chat with the moose that stole my bicycle helmet. Didn't I tell you about that? Maybe next month. I've got to get down to Popple's Pond.

