

Evenings with Henry

On April 15 I took off my skis for the last time and bid a sad adieu to winter. I would have been sorrier, except that with ski season over I could begin working on my New Year's resolution. My resolution was informed by the suggestion that I would be more likely to find resolve if I chose a project I would enjoy. Thus, on the first day of January, I declared that in the coming year I would make the acquaintance of a beaver.

I've always admired beavers for their industry and for their contributions to the diversity of the landscape. It wasn't until I read Dorothy Richard's book, *Beaversprite*, that it occurred to me that a beaver might be a worthy companion. The book describes her forty-year relationship with a pair of beavers and their progeny. The story begins in the 1930s when Samson and Delilah, as Dorothy called them, were released in a stream on her property as part of the effort to restore New York's beaver population. Dorothy gave little thought to the beavers for the first few months, but when she finally hiked to the part of the property where they'd been resettled she was astonished by the changes. The beavers had transformed meadow and thicket into a home for ducks and heron.

Dorothy's life was equally altered that day. She began to spend so much time at the pond (bearing poplar branches and apples) that she became accepted as a member of the beaver colony. My favorite photograph in the book shows Dorothy, a plain, middle-aged woman, reclining pond-side amidst a jolly-looking bunch of ten beavers, two of which were on her lap.

Dorothy's beaver fever led her to obtain a permit to raise a couple of beaver kits and keep them in her farmhouse. She and her husband created a pond in their basement and soon had a pair of beavers scrambling up and down the cellar stairs. Over the years, several generations of beavers occupied the increasingly elaborate accommodations the Richards provided. The book's description of the behavior of the "house beavers" revealed them to be creatures of great affection, playfulness, and intelligence—all excellent qualities in a companion.

I had my own beavers picked out already. They were about half a mile from my house by way of an old woods



road. With the ice was on its way out and the arrival of warm weather, I could begin spending evenings at the pond.

On the evening of my first visit the beavers swam by several times, slapping their tails on the first few passes. On the second evening they expressed more curiosity than alarm, though there were still tail slaps. By the third evening they had resumed their activities with what seemed a studied indifference, sometimes eating along the shore within thirty feet of me. After seven evenings at the pond it seems that the beavers have lost any concern about my presence. Time will tell if nonchalance will give way to curiosity.

In the meantime I have Henry to keep me company. He is one of the pair of geese I noticed the evening I began my project. For my first two visits, the gander maintained a discreet distance from the nest his mate tended on the beaver lodge. On the third evening he came flying up over the dam from a lower pond exchanging raucous honking with his mate. She stood up, carefully covered the eggs in the down from the nest, and flew out to greet him (I think I heard her call him Henry). Following a brief interaction during which there was much flapping and bowing, the gander turned and swam straight toward where I sat. It's

true that I had been making polite conversation on the preceding visits, still, I was surprised when Henry strolled from the water six feet from where I sat and stared at me. His mate peered nervously from behind him, but Henry just stretched his wings, yawned, and wagged his tail, the picture of goose contentment. He looked at me for several minutes before turning to follow his mate back into the pond.

I imagined that there was something in my manner that appealed to this wild goose, a fancy that Henry made short work of on the next evening. No sooner had I spread my picnic than he waded from the pond and strolled over to see what was for supper. Henry as you no doubt sur-

mise, has encountered hominids before. After eating his fill he stood nearby companionably and we each watched the activities of the pond at dusk.

Each evening since, he has joined me. I can't swear his attentions aren't based solely on gastronomy, but that's the way of many relationships. While I admire his black leathery feet and elegant plumage, he admires my Bavarian sprouted bread. I listen as the winter wrens, hermit thrushes, and a flock of rowdy grackles announce the approach of night. I'm not sure what engages Henry's attention once supper is finished, but I like to think he has decided that a person makes a worthy companion. I think a goose might be quite acceptable as well.