

Familiarity Breeds Content

When I resolved on New Year's Day, 2008, to make the acquaintance of a beaver, I had little notion of the incidental rewards that would accrue. I have always spent time in the woods, but have generally gone in a different direction on each outing. Now, each evening I walk the same path through the woods to my place on the shores of Popple's Pond. Along the way I pass a spring-fed pool in which five clusters of wood frog eggs appeared over three nights in April. I have watched the transformation from embryos to tadpoles. As the tadpoles get bigger, I find myself interested in how they group themselves in the water. I also observe that on certain parts of the trail I am likely to see newts in groups; other sections of the trail have none. Curious. Each day I have noted the arrival or passage of birds, the advance of buds, leaves, and flowers. I notice the appearance and disappearance of tracks on the trail. Familiarity has allowed me to see changes big and small.

Once I arrive at Popple's Pond, I record these observations in my notebook and settle down with a picnic to watch the progress of evening. Each visit brings new treats: the song of a pickerel frog, the heron perching at the tip of the tallest snag, the wood ducks and mergansers pausing on their search for a home, the sedge wren singing. Each evening brings things that can be predicted. Between seven and eight o'clock, a bold junco appears to pick through picnic crumbs. A winter wren sings from the dam after sunset. A flock of boisterous grackles swoops in at eight o'clock, making their wedge-tailed silhouettes against the sky. One little brown bat sweeps across the pond at eight-thirty.

I thought the nesting geese were becoming predictable, with the gander swimming over to join my picnic each evening. On May 4, however, a predator had their eggs for dinner and the geese departed. I saw them fly over my house that day, honking with agitation. Now on some evenings when I stay late enough, I hear a pair of geese fly over, heading from east to west. I hope they are "my" geese, and that they're enjoying a summer of leisure on other ponds in the neighborhood. If ever I can spare an evening to visit other ponds,

I'll see if they are around. I'll be able to recognize them, and it won't just be because of the gander's convivial nature. Among the things I made note of while watching Popple's Pond were the distinctive facial markings of these geese.

I would have been more disheartened at the loss of the geese, but the day they left the pond the beavers stepped in to fill the gander's position. I had carried in some striped maple branches, and within minutes of placing them in the pond, a beaver swam over, seized one in his teeth, towed it a short distance away, and began eating. I decided to call him Popple, since poplar is a favorite beaver food. When he finished eating, he swam back over to where I sat, climbed nonchalantly from the water and began grooming.

That was the only evening that Popple showed any interest in my food offerings. He has accepted me as a benign presence on the pond, and pays no attention if I approach and sit down near him. More often I watch him from afar. He seems to enjoy being aquatic, and I can easily recognize him by the grace and frequency of his porpoising dives.

The same night that Popple came ashore, another beaver watched from a safe distance. When Popple floated off, she swam up in slow arcs. Soon, she pulled her dripping mass ashore—all we see when a beaver swims is the top of her head, so when this one emerged like lumbering



amphibious vehicle, her bulk surprised me. Eyeing me nervously the entire time, she chewed the leaves of the striped maple within three feet of me. I decided to call her Willow.

I arrive at the pond between five and six o'clock most evenings. Willow has become so relaxed that she'll rest on her elbows and close her eyes while she eats beside me. If she stops chewing and seems nervous, I need only speak to her in a soothing tone and she relaxes again.

And so my New Year's resolution has been achieved. I suppose I could resume hikes to other areas and rekindle my social life. Ah, but there's the mystery of beaver number three to solve, and are there wood ducks in the nest box? When will the tadpoles sprout legs? Did the sedge wren find a mate? Besides, I'd miss my little chats with Willow. I think she'd miss them too, or at least my offerings of poplar branches.

I feel a bit embarrassed, as a lifelong watcher of nature, to have just discovered the rewards of watching and recording the daily events of one place. I'm looking forward becoming familiar with new things as summer advances—firefly flashes, cricket songs, maybe even baby beavers. If you haven't tried it yet, I recommend it.

"Familiarity" shares its derivation with "family." After just ten weeks of visits to Popple's Pond, despite the mosquitoes (which appeared on May 24), the place feels like home, and the lives of its inhabitants are of consequence to me. Strangely enough, the root the two words share is the Latin "famulus," which means servant. That might be more the way some of the pond residents view me. Especially the mosquitoes, though, come to think of it, we're probably related by blood by now.