

Ice

For nine months now, I have spent my evenings watching the activities of the beaver pond in my wild backyard. Since the time of ice-out, the seasons of this remote pond complex have absorbed my attention. Any day now the ponds will freeze over again, and their life will be obscured. The beavers will winter in their new lodge, venturing out to their cache under the ice to get their meals, and I will try to remember how I used to spend my time.

November proved to be an excellent month for beaver watching, with the additions of a flashlight and sleeping bag to the field kit. Bunchberry, the young beaver who had been in the lodge tending babies all summer, finally discovered my beaver cookies, and decided that I might be a good sort of animal to have around. She now spends as much time with me as her mother does, and they often eat next to each other.

Beaver cookies, by the way, are my name for the rodent nuggets used as nutrition for injured or orphaned beavers in rehabilitation centers. I offer these tasty treats as a token of good will, not to replace any part of their natural diet. Good will accepted, I now enjoy the benefits of the beavers' trust. I count among these perquisites such pleasures as standing next to the lodge and watching a determined beaver wrestle a log to its summit, and to basking in the curious intimacy of reading while a rotund rodent scratches its belly three feet away.

On November 20 I returned from a three-day trip to find the beaver's world transformed from open water to ice. The ice offered the chance to view the beaver's activities from a fresh perspective. I surveyed their food pile, watched them enter and exit the lodge, and followed their bubble trails— all beneath my feet. I also learned about the beavers' skills as ice-breakers. I recorded three basic approaches: the pushing down vigorously with the front feet technique, the pushing up from underneath with the back technique, and the mastication technique. For the next few nights the beavers worked assiduously to maintain some open water. By November 23, however,

it seemed the ice would get the best of them. Only a small hole remained. I began to make plans for re-entering human society.

After a few mild days, however, the ice began to recede, and the beavers were back. I wasn't really ready for civilization yet, so this pleased me. Besides, I hoped for a favorable resolution to the Popple Mystery—one of the many humbling puzzles in my endeavors to understand the dynamics of this small beaver colony. For a couple of months I have suspected that a beaver was missing. Looking back through my journal, I discovered that the last time I saw all three big beavers at once was on September 5, three months ago.

I recognize Willow and Bunchberry by a number of features. Willow can be identified by her boney hips, boxy muzzle, and the notch in her tail. Bunchberry is smaller, has a narrow, unnotched tail, and the cute face and submissive demeanor of a juvenile. Popple, the patriarch, has been more difficult to inspect on land, but I once documented a double notch in his tail. When I first began to wonder about my count I assumed that Bunchberry, the yearling, had moved on to find her own mate. When she began coming ashore for cookies, and I could identify her, however, I started looking for Popple.

When I searches for recent Popple sightings in my notes, I found that I couldn't swear I'd seen him since September. I did find an unsettling observation recorded soon after I had seen the big beavers together for the last time; on this day a new behavior appeared, the lunge-splash. On the



evening in question, Willow seemed agitated, and when Ducky approached she launched herself into the pond with a skidding dive and disappeared. Ducky came back, however, and demonstrated her own little lunge-splash. Later, in the dark, I could hear similar splashings repeated farther up the shore. This behavior continued for several evenings. Could a calamitous event have upset them? If so, I doubt it was Popple's demise, since in the ensuing weeks, Surprise Pond, the family's winter quarters, materialized upstream, replete with new home and filled larder. Could the youthful Bunchberry have undertaken such an enterprise on her own? I suspect that Popple did much of this work and disappeared more recently, the victim of a logging accident or predation. I continue to kindle the hope that he is working on a project in the lodge, or has developed the habit of sleeping late. I sometimes see a beaver later in the evening who acts more aloof than the cookie hounds. I can't quite see the tail, but maybe. . .

Thanksgiving served as a capstone to my seasons with the beavers. After spending a solitary hour at my usual observation post, I decided the beavers must be engaged elsewhere. I went looking and found they had felled a small hemlock into the brook. Though I saw no beavers, I did see a hemlock branch disappearing in jerks under the ice. Soon little Ducky, now about the size of a muskrat, popped up from under the ice. I greeted her in my usual way, and to my delight, she greeted me in hers, the meet-and-greet squeaks she uses when talking to other beavers. This was a first, and I was utterly charmed. I have become an honorary beaver!

Soon the beavers will be sealed into their watery world for the winter, and you, dear readers, will have a reprieve as I find other creatures to write about. Long about April, though, won't you be wondering how the beavers managed their season under the ice? I sure will, and long about April I'll be sure to let you know.

