

The View from Heifer Hill—August 2012

Hideaway Pond



One of the prettiest beaver ponds I know occupies a tiny basin on the side of a mountain. It reflects a natural rock garden of ledges and trees on one shore. From the opposite shore the mountain drops away at your feet to another basin two hundred feet below, where another beaver pond reflects the sky. The rill that feeds the pond splashes in over a miniature waterfall in the shade of hemlocks, and departs in a long steep cascade to the lower pond. Small wonder that the site once inspired humans to bushwhack in a couple of miles lugging the materials to create a camp: metal roofing, a wood stove, windows, lumber. . . and finally the items that made it homey: curtains, bedding, books, cooking utensils. . . An old saw blade stuck onto a stump invites visitors to “Enjoy the stillness and peace of Nature.”

While I admire the spirit that inspired such an endeavor, their sign’s message is now ironical; their camp resembles a dump of sodden fiberglass insulation, odd pieces of metal, the collapsed remains of aluminum window frames, and numerous treasures turned to trash.

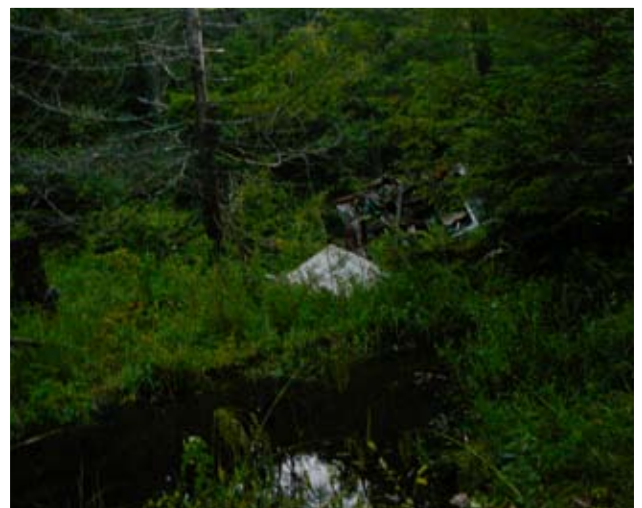
When I first found this pond several years ago, a single beaver was in residence. The peeper chorus was in full throat, and I sat by the lower pond to watch the beaver, my back to the cliffy knoll the derelict camp sprawled upon. No evening can be serene amidst the din of peepers, and if the noise weren’t enough, several peepers pelted me as they lost control on their descent to the pond. That evening I watched a northern water shrew scurry across the surface of the water, the only mortal mammal I know of capable of such a feat. Heading home I practically tripped over a porcupine that had ambled into the meadow around the pond to enjoy the bounty of leaves within easy reach.

This summer, I found new beaver occupants in Hideaway Pond—Ducky and Growler. My three regular readers will know Ducky to be the kit born during the summer I began beaver watching. They will have followed her trials and triumphs as she grew, left home, and set up housekeeping with Growler. I last wrote of her in December when she and Growler had settled into a new pond for their second winter together.

This spring, the pair developed a remarkable set of mud levees. These turned the meadow below their pond into shallow paddies where they could graze in safety and hoard the small trickle of water that flowed from their pond. I wondered how they fared as summer’s drought intensified, so I headed up one evening to check on them. Indeed, although their pond still held water, their new pools were dry and I saw no signs of activity. I had a pretty good idea where they would be.

Peach faded from the sunset clouds as I arrived at Hideaway Pond and settled near the dam, the dam freshly fortified by armfuls of mud scooped from the pond bottom and patted into place by miniature five-fingered hands. A partially eaten harvest of twigs and leaves floated nearby, and so did one of the pond’s occupants; Ducky swam over to the dam, plucked an apple from my hands with her teeth and floated in the water eating it. Growler swam over, too, and began eating the apple slices I tossed to him.

They had constructed a lodge against a bedrock outcropping that confined the pond, and when Ducky had her fill of apples, she climbed onto it to oil her coat. From



beside her I heard a splash and then a third beaver appeared in the middle of the pond, a very small beaver. The kit paddled toward Growler, who floated near me munching an apple. I chatted softly to avoid startling the new addition to my beaver clan— the House of Willow. Growler took his next apple and paddled away. The youngster and I studied each other until she noticed that her parents had departed. Alarmed, she slapped her tail and swam straight into the lodge.

Soon the kit dove back into the water and began paddling busy circles in the middle of the pond. Growler swam to her and they greeted each other with beaver squeaks and swam off together to graze, an interaction more typical of mother/kit than father/kit relations. I might need to switch the sexes of the parents.

The moon disappeared behind the western hills. Hermit thrushes sang, creating surprising and beautiful chords, like Mongolian throat singers. The barred owls warmed up for a raucous night with a few shrieks and cackles. I watched Ducky work on the lodge and enjoyed the contemplation of a circle completed—a kit born, grown, and now with a family and pond of her (his?) own.

When the beavers leave this basin, as beavers have done countless times over countless centuries, the earth will quickly reclaim their lodge. The water level will drop, and wetland and meadow plants will grow in the nutrient-rich sediments. Deer, moose, bear, and porcupine will come to the meadow to browse. When beavers rebuild, a circle will end as a new one begins. Such cycles, small and large, have made life possible on this piece of rock for millennia.

It will take many, many years for the hideaway camp to disappear, and when it does, very little of it will enrich the forest ecosystem. It reminds me that we must think of endings when we make beginnings, for all things end. In nature, endings feed beginnings. By this law charmed places exist— places where tiny frogs rain, mammals run across the water, and hermit thrushes sing.



Ducky