

Wild Water

Vermonters seldom witness Nature's majestic disdain for the ambitions of her creatures. It is not to be wondered at that so many of us were unprepared for the heavenly deliverance of a southern sea; Irene was, after all, a tropical storm. Nature may not consider the fate of her creatures, but as I watched the water from my window, I certainly did. I was especially curious about my beaver colony. Would their dams withstand the high water? Would their lodges flood? As the water reached its highest level in this little watershed, I set out into the rain to find out.

Where the beavers modest stream once flowed five feet below a skidder bridge, it now roared over the top, a seething torrent fifty feet wide. How would the aquatic insects, salamanders, and fish fare in this overwhelming deluge? Their nurturing, buoyant medium had been transformed into a smashing, grinding, driving flood, their sheltering

that once abutted the beavers' dam. The dams were gone. I thought I could make out the top of their lodge, but I knew my chance of seeing any beavers was slim in this chaos of rush and rumble and the veil of still falling rain.

Later that afternoon the sun came out. Charles the woodchuck emerged from beneath his rock and grazed. A chipmunk, also dry, sat up on another rock. Crickets and grasshoppers creaked out their same songs. From their vantage, and mine, the world seemed unchanged. For those whose lives were connected more directly to the water, however, I would need to take another look.

Once the water returned to the sea, I explored the brook again. At the skidder bridge I found the course of the stream had changed. A bar of mid-sized stones now blocked the former course of the brook, and sent it to the east a bit. A vernal pool on the far shore, home to spotted salamander larvae, was now buried beneath a pile of cobbles, the bed of a stream that lived for just a few hours.

The root mat of the streamside vegetation had been peeled and rolled back, revealing the tunnels of shrews and voles in the naked mud of the bank. How many residents of the riparian zone made it safely to high ground? Dead Duck Dam, one of the older and taller dams on the brook, had a great hole ripped through it. Water had risen here in a great standing wave as it coursed through that gap at the peak of the



Beaver brook bridge during flood



Beaver brook bridge after flood

New cobble mountain

rocks plucked and tumbled by water rendered powerful by sheer volume.

As I worked my way upstream, water flowed in sheets through the woods, and I forded knee-deep streams where I had never seen streams before. I reached my destination, the new pond the beavers had constructed during the summer. In this wider part of the valley, Irene's tide slowed and spread out into the forest. I waded to an island hummock

flood. A set of beaver tracks led from sorry remains of the pond up to a fresh scent mound on the bank. Upstream, at the pond where the beavers overwintered, the water level had dropped a foot, but the dam held. The lodge also appeared to be intact. At the far side of the pond a beaver was busy with dam repairs. When she noticed me, Willow, the colony matriarch swam over and climbed up the muddy bank for a snack.

After a short visit, I continued my survey. At their new pond, the dams were indeed gone completely. The entrance to their lodge was now above water and a hole had been ripped in the side. Although I worried about the beavers, I was optimistic that they survived if they managed to keep away from the debris-laden current. They had so many bank lodges; surely one or two remained above water. Even without shelter, the beavers would have been fine waiting out the flood. As for the destruction of their dams, each autumn, these beavers typically construct a brand new pond, lodge and larder. They would have plenty of time to rebuild.

Between these two sites is a third pond. Half grown in with emergent grasses and sedges, it is a bright green place with a big piece of sky above and a view of the mountain on the far side. Here I found three more beavers. When I sat down on the bank, two of them swam over eagerly, the two young beavers. I handed out apples and they settled down, making their proprietary squeaky whines. I then directed my attention to the third beaver, the one that approached uncertainly, the one with the very small tail, a new baby beaver! She swam up and prodded her siblings. They squeaked at her. She paddled over to the dam, ducked her head under the water, and came up with a pile of mud on her nose. She poked it onto the dam with all of the gravity and industry of her clan.

The only beaver missing was Bunchberry, the patriarch. For the past month he had been recovering from a wound inflicted in a territorial dispute. He could well be off surveying the damage or scouting for new dam sites. Still, even a beaver might have been seriously injured in that epic high water.

Night settled upon the pond with an intense blackness, and the universe sparkled above. I turned off my light and settled back to enjoy the perspective gained by a tour of deep space. In an infinity of blazing stars and black holes the events of this little planet seem safe and predictable, even with the odd tropical storm. I returned to earth when I heard the hum of a rodent greeting. When I turned my flashlight on, I found a large damp beaver sitting beside me, hoping I'd brought him some rodent nuggets. Bunchberry had weathered the hurricane, too.

