

The View From Heifer Hill—October 2009

From the Shores of Lake Dismal

On August 10, I reluctantly abandoned my beaver-watching post on the scenic shores of Surprise Pond. The beavers, betraying appalling aesthetic judgment, had moved to their new pondworks, a spot I call Lake Dismal. The new pond arose in one of the few places along this brook that has never been flooded by beavers before. Here, the stream had begun a dam of its own, wedging some debris across a narrow cascade. Perhaps embarrassed to find such a sorry dam in their territory, the beavers soon had water backing up behind a sturdy structure that rose four feet from the streambed.

When the gods are smiling, such a natural dam site will have a broad floodplain upstream, and will provide aquatic access to a fresh bounty of woody vegetation. In this case, the stream flowed through a narrow bowl, and most of the trees within it were spruce, hemlock, and red maple—trees generally disdained by these beavers. It may have been the spruces that prejudiced me against their new pond—as a lifelong tree enthusiast, red spruce is the one species I regularly curse.

The red spruce that grew in close ranks along the new pond shore reinforced this bias. The only way to reach the shore was to thrash through a thicket of rough dead branches in the understory. The canopy of the trees concealed the sky, and only the occasional croak of a green frog suggested that any creature aside from the beavers would recognize this forested puddle as a pond. By the end of that first evening, however, I found that Lake Dismal had an enchantment of its own.

After long evenings enjoying the sky-filled vistas of Popple's Pond, and then Surprise Pond, I had forgotten my troglodyte heritage. Somewhere in my lineage must be a people with an affinity for caves, for I have always been attracted to dark enclosed spaces. Once I had settled in for my first evening at Lake Dismal, I shone my bright flashlight down the length of the pond. Several trees canted across the water, and the beavers had already removed the bark from their bases. The bookend reflections of these pale trunks in the still black water created the effect of a tunnel. There,



in the close shadows, the beaver family emerged one by one from the foliage of a sugar maple they had felled into the water: Willow; Bunchberry; Ducky; the baby, Snowberry—and what was this? A second baby beaver! They gathered around me to eat, the elder beavers eating the treats I had brought, and the youngsters chewing the more familiar maple branches. Mice and a green frog sat near me, too, the mice to eat the sunflower seeds I had sprinkled around optimistically, the green frog for his own ineffable reasons.

The entire beaver family soon became very accustomed to my presence. Willow and Bunchberry often leave the pond to greet me when I begin floundering through spruces. The need to step over beavers while ducking branches makes the pond approach even more challenging. These two beavers are now so relaxed that they will lean against me while they eat. They are equally willing to entertain my friends, and show me little, if any, preferential treatment when I arrive with company.

The two babies do not yet leave the security of aquatic environs, but they soon became expert at bobbing for the apples I rolled into the water for them. The only time I see them leave the water is when they climb into the branches of fallen trees. They pretend an interest in the edible parts of the tree, chewing bark as they clamber about. They don't fool me with their "I'm a serious beaver" act, though. Once Snowberry climbed onto a horizontal trunk that one of the adults was

chewing through. The trunk bounced with the efforts of the big beaver, and the baby straddled it as if it were a mechanical bull. She was bucked into the pond three times and each time scrambled back into the saddle. Her giant, webbed hind feet and roly-poly figure, not typical attributes of arboreal mammals, added to the comedy of the scene.

Now that the bugs have stopped biting, I can sleep beneath the spruces on the shores of Lake Dismal. The beavers remain active all night, and I have been awakened by Willow clambering over my legs in her quests for stray beaver treats. Sometimes I turn on the flashlight and find Ducky beside me asking for an apple.

My sleeping location is next to one of the beaver runways, short paths that they use to build up speed as they work on their new home renovation project. Their Lake Dismal digs were a den in the streambank. Over the past few weeks a dome of sticks and mud has risen steadily on the bank on top of this den. Peering into this thick latticework with my flashlight one night, I saw one of the babies, glossy and dry, peering back at me. The beavers had dug up through the ceiling of their earthen den and had expanded their living quarters into this new lodge. Throughout the night I hear the patter of webbed feet as the beavers, with their armloads of sticks and mud, hustle as far up the dome as they can. Once the cargo is deposited, they push it into place with their paws, rocking back and forth to take full advantage of their bulk. Larger sticks are worked into the structure one by one, and chewed off from the inside as they shape their chambers.

As autumn progresses, I look forward to watching the lodge and winter food cache grow. If I'm extra lucky, I will have more sightings of the flying squirrel that scampered through the branches above me last week. I'm sure the jumping mice and the shrew will return for sunflower seeds. One expects such rewards sitting on the shores of Lake Dismal.