

Let it Snow

The last of my firewood is stacked, the hay is in the shed; when I get the studded tires on the car my snow incantations will begin in earnest. I'm doing pretty well with the chores this year, but a mile up the brook behind my house a family of rodents has put me to shame. They have built a pond, excavated a canal system, raised a house, and laid in a winter's supply of food. When the ice and snow arrive, they will retire to their lodge and will seldom have to deal with temperatures below freezing. They have accomplished all of this with only a set of chisel teeth, little hands and stubby legs, and occasional assistance from flat tails, webbed feet, and big bellies,

Those of you who have read this column before will not need to be introduced to this family of beavers. We last visited them in early October. At that time they had moved to the homely, spruce-infested pond, Lake Dismal, and had started work on their new lodge. They have continued to make good progress since, but not without adversity. One evening in mid-October, I stopped to visit and found Willow, the matriarch, behaving strangely. None of the other beavers appeared. I hiked back the next night with a couple of friends. Willow came ashore as usual, but her snacking was punctuated by pauses to emit huffs of agitation. She made frequent trips to the pond and back, and once trundled over and did the waggle dance beavers do when they are marking scent mounds. Sure enough, a sweet perfume arose from the spot when Willow stormed back to the water. Did the scent marking suggest that a strange beaver had passed through their territory? I hoped this was the case.

I brought the same visitors back five days later. This time the beavers had resumed their normal behavior. When we sat down on the shore next to the lodge, Willow and Bunchberry settled down next us to enjoy a picnic of rodent nuggets, while Ducky, the yearling, delicately plucked apples from my fingers and carried them to the water to eat. One of the babies (I called them both Snowberry since I couldn't tell them apart) swam back and forth nearby, waiting for us to toss her apples. She had become expert at wrestling floating apples, and when she subdued one, she swam into the



lodge to eat it. Each time she entered the lodge, I listened for the apple-defense squeaks that would prove that Snowberry II was in the lodge as well. Silence reigned.

After two weeks of seeing just one baby, I accepted the evidence that an unfortunate event had occurred. The babies were about the size of muskrats at that time, and had just begun tentative sorties ashore. Coyotes, bears, and bobcats were on my suspect list, with coyotes at the top since I often saw their tracks and scat in the area. I love coyotes, those beautiful, wild, golden dogs, but I wish they had a different way to make a living. I know this to be the bargain of life in nature—beauty and abundance cannot exist without ruthlessness and strict economy. At least in nature the beauty and wonder are omnipresent, and even a sad night on the shores of Lake Dismal contains grace.

Each time I visited, the pond was larger. The dam is now seven feet tall in places and spans about forty feet. The flooded area extends out into an old beaver meadow, and enough of the canopy trees have been felled that I can see some stars from my seat beneath the spruces. The pond will need a new name if it becomes any more impressive.

The beavers' lodge has become a mountainous igloo of sticks and mud, packed by the passage of many big bellies and webbed feet. I expect it will continue to grow until freeze-up. When the walls freeze as hard

