

## The View From Heifer Hill—August 2009

# Stealth Beavers

Willow

photo by Paul Miller

A funny thing happens when you spend enough timewith anyone reasonably likeable, even large damp rodents—a familial fondness develops. After spending evenings with a group of beavers for seventeen months, I find my affection has developed accordingly. Fondness is not the only emotion families evoke, of course. Many others leap readily to mind. Among them are false premonitions of doom—the tendency to leap to worst possible scenarios to explain the tardiness of cherished ones. This was, naturally, my reaction when the beavers disappeared in late June.



Surprise Pond, the hub of beaver activities, is almost a mile from my house, and since the beavers are active at dusk and into the night, I often camp there. My tent is set up several hundred yards from the pond. One night while I sat by the pond, coyotes began barking in the vicinity of my tent. At first I found this barking an amusing addition to the night music. As it grew later and the beavers didn't appear, I remembered that coyotes sometimes eat beavers. The worry seed was planted.

When no beavers appeared on my next two visits to the pond, worry's roots expanded their grip on my mind. I came early. I stayed late. Surely some tragic event had occurred to make reasonably regular rodents so alter their behavior. I told myself that my concern was not entirely irrational; coyotes, bears, and bobcats sometimes do eat beavers, though they can only attack when the beavers are on shore and they need to calculate the risks of attacking a fifty-pound rodent that cuts down trees with its teeth.

On the fourth visit I finally saw a beaver. At 9:15 p.m. Ducky paddled across the north end of the pond and disappeared into the lodge. No other beavers appeared that night, but I had evidence that at least one was still in residence.

I should confess here, that despite my concern, I also nurtured a hope. There is another reason that a beaver family's activities might be disrupted this time of year—the arrival of babies. A review of my notes from last summer showed no similar lapses in Willow's visits, but maybe every year is different. I knew that the chances for such a blessed event were a bit less than fifty percent. Willow's mate, Popple, disappeared last fall. Since beaver mating season occurs in late winter when beavers are still living under the ice in their ponds, she could only mate with Bunchberry the beaver I had arbitrarily assigned a female gender. Given beaver social dynamics, Bunchberry is likely to

be Willow's offspring from a litter two years ago. Mating with close relations is not uncommon in the world of beavers, I have read, since beavers' options for finding mates are limited. But was Bunchberry male or female?

When I headed to the pond on July first, after a week with just one beaver sighting, I decided to follow the stream all the way from my house to Surprise Pond. As I neared my destination I discovered one reason that there had been less activity at my beaver-watching site. Where the stream once gurgled cheerfully through a constriction in the bedrock, it now tumbled over a dam. Willow floated smugly on the new pond forming behind it, as if she had no idea how worried I'd been!

She beat me upstream to Surprise Pond and was underfoot in her eagerness for our picnic. I also carried in some aspen branches, Ducky's favorite treat, and as I hoped, she soon paddled over to investigate. She selected a branch and towed it off to the lodge. When Bunchberry clambered ashore, too, I enjoyed the mix of relief and embarrassment that comes when worry withers in disgrace.

My observation spot is on a rocky hillside that drops in steps to the pond. From here I can see most of the northern end of the pond, and can look across to the lodge. This hillside is cushioned by a springy carpet of snowberry, a delicate little creeper with tiny round leaves. From here I spent the next hour watching Bunchie and Willow work on their lodge and listened to the dusk chorus that marked the beginning of a new month. All was well, and apparently back to normal.

At 10 p.m. I was engrossed in writing up final observations when I felt something bump my foot. I shone my headlamp into the gloom and found Willow nosing around for a bedtime snack. I obliged, and when she left, I gave the pond a final scan

with my bright flashlight and binoculars. I picked up the reflection of a wake over by the lodge, and at its genesis a very small beaver. As the beaver zigzagged across the pond toward me she became, paradoxically, even smaller, as she transformed from possibly Ducky to definitely not Ducky. Welcome Snowberry!

This baby beaver, in her coat of dense fluffy fur, was as buoyant as a duckling. She paddled by, gazing curiously at the strange creature and the strange light. When I said hello, she demonstrated her ability to dive, and gave a comical little tail slap on the way down. Just a wee baby, and already responsible for the well-being of her family.

Later, in my tent, I heard the murmurings of the mother porcupine and her porcupette as they worked their way across the hillside behind me. The mother made a series of low humming sounds, as if counting seconds, and then the wee one answered in her littler voice. The night had been a rich payment for my week of worry.

Last week I spotted a pair of glowing lamps across the pond in my flashlight beam—eyeshine flickering from orange to green. They watched me for forty-five minutes and disappeared only when I went to investigate. For several days I saw no beavers. Did I worry this time? You bet. Did the beavers all show up again? Every one.