

The View From Heifer Hill—January 2012

The Beavers of The Balsams

Early in the summer of 2011, the beaver family—Wilow, Bunchberry and their three progeny—began new construction where their stream ran through a scraggly second-growth forest of spruce and fir. While spruce and fir are only minor spices in the diet of *Castor canadensis*, the new impoundment gave them access to a tract of alder, a boon in their gastronomically impoverished watershed.

For a shore-bound creature such as myself, the new pond was decidedly lacking in amenities. The only place to sit was a tiny spot at the base of a fir tree, and I had to keep my knees tucked up to keep my toes dry. There was not sufficient room for all five beavers to join me, so they had to come ashore in shifts to enjoy the treats I brought them. No vista of sky or hillside redeemed this humble patch of shoreline; only a narrow band of sky could be seen, broken by the spindly spires of the conifers on the far side of the brook. To reach the beavers' new lodge, built against the bank just downstream, I had to pick my way through a miniature forest of balsam fir seedlings so dense it concealed the erratically pitted terrain and the treacherous maze of toppled spruce poles.

Uninspiring as the location was, it needed a name so I could distinguish it in my journal. I decided it should share the name of a grand old mountain hotel where I once attended a conference. Located in northern New Hampshire, The Balsams stood regally ringed by mountains, its stone facade duplicated in the still waters of its own small lake.

Tropical storm Irene did nothing to improve the appearance of the beavers' humble pond. In two hours the swell carried away half of their new lodge, erased all trace of their recent damming, and left behind untidy piles of battered debris from upstream. Undeterred, the beavers stoically resurrected The Balsams. Long before the official arrival of winter, the beavers had gathered the enormous cache of branches that would feed the family through the winter. Their lodge, freshly plastered with a thick layer of mud for winter warmth and security, was reflected in the still waters of its own small (very small) lake.

Throughout December the pond ice spread and retreated again, but never fully sealed the beavers into their dark aquatic world. On January 2, after more warm weather and rain, I headed to The Balsams at dusk. Heat from the day radiated back into the winter-clear heavens and temperatures were heading down into the single digits.

When I arrived at my usual seat I found that only the center of the pond was open. Farther upstream, I found a place where open water reached almost to the bank, and the soggy shore had frozen enough that I could sit without getting wet. I called to the beavers and soon two appeared, paddling eagerly upstream. After some puzzling, Dewberry and Snowberry—the yearling and two-year-old—found their way over for their apples. Dewberry has grown to be almost as large as her older sibling. I can now distinguish the two only by behavior. Snowberry approaches to a place she guesses is within my reach and waits for an apple to appear under her nose. Dewberry has accepted me as an odd but benevolent member of her pond community since we first met. She often squeaks excitedly when she first swims up, and then marches right up and climbs onto my legs if the apples don't appear immediately. This little beaver has a special place in my affections.

Watching these two munching apples side-by-side, I pondered what the new year held for them. Snowberry, at two years, should have headed off to start her own family last spring according to the typical beaver schedule. Next spring both of these young beavers will likely head out. I scanned my mind for safe places in the watershed where these two might settle, and came up with very few good options. Those options depend entirely upon the movements and tolerance of the three existing beaver families in the stream system.

As daylight faded, the half full January moon grew in radiance as only winter moons can, turning the ice to silver and casting spruce shadows across the pale Lilliputian



forest of firs. As the cold began to seep through my layers and the apple bag emptied, I bid the Berries a happy winter and headed down to see if other beavers stirred.

From the center of the pond I could hear ice breaking and could just make out the shape of one of the big beavers clambering onto its surface for a grooming session. I crouched on the lodge, put my ear to its surface and heard the staccato chewing of a beaver dining. I imagined Sundew, the 2011 kit, snug in the warm but moonless dark of the lodge, resting on her elbows on her bed of dried sedges, devouring a twig she had retrieved from the larder.

The chill that settled that night and deepened over the next one allowed the ice to claim the pond. Safe from predators, well provisioned and warm, the beavers of The Balsams now have a season of leisure before them.