



The View From Heifer Hill—July 2024

A Beaver Chorus



There are few sounds as delightful as those made by beaver kits greeting their mother. First you hear the gurgle as she hauls herself out of the water in the dark lodge, then a chorus of excited squeak-whines from the kits. The adult gives the standard beaver greeting, a deep hum, and then a few squeak-whines of her own. As the kits settle down to nurse, the squeaks become more intermittent, but the conversation continues.

Two years ago, my beaver biologist pal Jen Vanderhoof was visiting from Seattle the weekend Pye gave birth. We stood next to the lodge and celebrated one of the first squeak-whine sessions of the new kits.

Some readers will remember that Pye is a beaver who came to BEEC's wildlife orphanage as a badly injured yearling. Her arrival brought great joy to Pumpkin, the lonely yearling I had been caring for since shortly

after his birth. Pumpkin and Pye were soon fast friends. They spent the fall and winter together in a fenced pond and were released in the spring of their second year. The sound of the kits greeting Pye was ample compensation for the many challenges of caring for those beavers.

Beaver kits are born ready for action. They have open eyes, chisel teeth, and wee paddle tails. Still, it takes them a month to master diving, so they spend that time in the security of the lodge. I enjoyed many squeak-whine concerts before I saw the three little kits bobbing on the pond. The family —Pumpkin, Pye, and the three Nutmegs, passed an idyllic summer and were well-situated in their cozy lodge for the winter. Beavers are safe and secure in their watery world, but they are vulnerable when they are ashore. Pumpkin, who wandered farthest, went missing in late March. I miss

that goofy rodent more than I can say. When the peeper chorus started in the spring, Pye became nervous and I no longer saw the yearling kits. Then Pye disappeared too. I imagined predators had an easy time sneaking up on the beaver family in the peeper din, and that they had been taken, one by one. Those were gloomy days.

When I learned that fresh beaver sign had been spotted nearby, I found Pye and a surviving Nutmeg. A nice lodge had risen in a thicket of shrubs and the pond was expanding.

This year, Jen came back in early July and we set out to Pye's pond to listen for kits. We had reason to hope; Pye and Nutmeg had been joined by another beaver. Since beavers are very territorial, we knew he must be a male and a new mate for Pye. Jen is a photographer, and as she unpacked her camera gear, we kept an eye out for the ripples of an approaching beaver.

Pye is still a little gimpy from her old injuries and she has unusually large eyes, so I

recognize her. When she came ashore, Jen and I checked her belly. Sure enough, Pye was nursing kits. Ten minutes later Nutmeg arrived. Nutmeg had nipples too!

Between us, Jen and I have read most of what there is to read about beavers. Nearly all sources say that a beaver colony is composed of a mated pair and their offspring from the previous two years. Jen is working on a beaver book of her own, one that debunks some of the beaver myths and reveals some little-known beaver super-powers. Still, we were both gob-smacked to see two mothers. What should we call this? A throuple? A *menagerie a tois*? Was it a nursing free-for-all when one of the mothers entered the lodge, or did the offspring segregate?

When Pye and Nutmeg swam off, I walked out on a log to place one of Jen's underwater cameras near the lodge. From there I could hear it very clearly, the gurgle as one of the mothers swam in, the shake as she dried off in the foyer, then eager squeak-whines from a bevy of baby beavers.

