



The View From Heifer Hill—January 2024

A Fine Dam Crew



THE BEAVERS of Gates Pond are the trust fund beavers of our region. Their 30-acre pond is very shallow, and by mid-summer lily pads cover the surface—a delicious bonanza for beavers, muskrats, deer, moose, and an entire community of tiny creatures. Of greater importance to the beavers, water lilies have edible roots that remain a food source all winter. The beavers of Gates Pond seldom need to leave the sanctuary of the water.

I recommend paddling there. At dusk, you will see the beavers munching lily leaves and families of ducks making their way along the channels the beavers clear. If your timing is right, you will hear the strange water pump call of an American bitter, spot eagles in the pines, or otters surfacing like periscopes.

This winter, ice had covered the pond by mid-December and the beavers relaxed in their cozy lodges. They didn't worry about the steady rain that fell—3 inches in 24 hours. Not at first. The high water began cutting away at the bank on the south side of their dam. With the pressure of the torrent focused on that point, a section of the dam broke away and the waters of Gates Pond thundered after it.

When daylight broke the next day, Gates Pond was an ice-covered mudflat with a stream running through it. The forlorn beavers sat in small groups

on the ice by the open water. Their lodges were high and dry and far from the safety of water.

Cars that usually sped by slowed and sometimes stopped. People got out and came to the shore to look. For eight long days and nights, the dejected beavers contemplated their new circumstances. With limited access to food and no shelter, they were doomed, along with many other organisms of that amazing pond.

Then one night, as a full moon rose and cast a glow across the ice, a new group of people arrived. This time they walked across the dam and surveyed the gap. The next day, a big truck pulled up. It said "All About Trees" on the side. The beavers' noses told them that a fragrant mountain of fir boughs was being off-loaded. Later that afternoon, as a drizzly rain let up, a convoy arrived. There were cars stuffed with brush, logs tied to roof racks, and two pick-up loads of saplings. The pile grew and, as the beavers watched, people lined up across the dam and passed it all, branch by branch, to the open water by the hole in the dam.

The people drove back to their own lodges, confident that the beavers would set to work repairing their dam now that they had the materials. The beavers swam over to inspect the pile. They took some of the aspen branches, their favorites, back to their seats on the ice to eat. They did not



commence dam repairs that night. Nor the next. People came back and scratched their heads.

It was clear that these beavers needed more than woody materials to patch the dam. What did they need? Hope? Inspiration? Higher water? On the third day, another convoy arrived. This time, the two-leggeds got into the breach and did their best to be beavers. They piled rocks and wove branches and dumped bucket-loads of mud. The beavers sat and watched. They could not have been very impressed. Still, by the next morning, the pond level had risen a foot and water stretched across the basin again. All but two of the beavers were able to return home.

Colder weather had arrived and soon the pond would freeze again. If the water could rise just a little more, no beavers would be homeless. Another dam party convened, the strange structure grew, and the last two beavers returned to their lodge.

As part of the beaver team, I talked with locals and learned about the pond's history. David, the pond owner, told me a farmer made a wooden dam to create the pond sometime in the past century. He would open the sluice in the summer to drain the land for pasture and would flood it in the winter to harvest ice. At some point, the wood was replaced by a haphazard stone dam. Beavers took over the maintenance when they returned to their homeland in the 1960s. David said the pond had drained several times in the fifty years that his family has owned it, but that the beavers had been quick with their repairs.

I can only guess why these beavers did not take over the damming once we provided supplies. In the winter, beavers' metabolisms slow so they can survive on fewer calories. It is possible they lacked the needed energy to rebuild. I have searched the literature for accounts of dam building in the winter and have found nothing. My observations include watching a single, homeless beaver create a new pond and lodge in early December. I have also seen beavers wait until spring to make repairs after dam failures.

A couple of people invoked Darwin and suggested we should have let nature take its course. Let's take a closer look at Darwin; the great thinker was initially stymied by a trait that did not fit into his theory of natural selection—selflessness. If evolution rewards those who survive to reproduce, how could he explain his many observations of animals making sacrifices to help others survive? In "The Descent of Man," Darwin proposed an answer: members of groups that practice altruism and cooperation fare better than groups of more selfish individuals. Indeed, the impulse to aid friends and neighbors in times of trouble gives me hope for the future of this dear planet. I saw that hope reflected in the happy faces of those who built the dam and watched the water rise.

I checked in on the beavers of Gates Pond in mid-January. The dam is holding despite a few rainy days. The beavers, snug in their lodges, dream of summer evenings when they will float in the warm, shallow waters munching lily pads.

