

The Work of a Beaver



On November 18, I take you again to The Balsams, the home of three of the beavers I study. The sun has just set, and the moon, nearly half full, is high in the clear sky. These beavers have me puzzled. Elsewhere, beavers have been busy for weeks getting their lodges plastered in mud and caching their winter's food supply. While the beaver lodge here is getting larger, the beavers have not begun the plastering phase. Furthermore, I see no sign of branches being stored in the deep water outside the lodge. While I am puzzled, I'm not worried; Dew and Bebryx are survivors, and their yearling kit, Bebe, has demonstrated her competence as well.

I have known Dew since she was a kit, and she considers me a member of her colony. Bebryx has been her mate for two years, but until this month I have only been able to verify his existence with trail cameras. Regular readers of this column will know why—a traumatic event robbed him of a beaver's most distinguishing feature, his tail. This month, quite suddenly, he is following the lead of Dew and Bebe and has come ashore near me.

When I tell people about Bebryx, they rightly wonder how he can do the work of beaver without a tail. While it's only in children's books that beavers use their tails to carry things, the tails are an important part of the beaver structure. They increase buoyancy and agility in the water and stability on the land, where they often walk short distances on their hind legs to carry mud. It is also needed for the beavers' signature move, the tail slap. Somehow Bebryx has adapted. Trail

cameras have captured him performing all of these activities. His tail slap is the only failure.

I have just returned from a West Coast "State of the Beaver" conference. What a treat to spend several days in the company of people who appreciate the importance of beavers. You will know why if you consider the brief period during which Western Civilization has been imposed upon the American West: rivers have been piped into cities and commandeered for irrigation; salmon streams have been degraded by logging and grazing practices; add the climate crisis to the list of our sins and there is less snow in the mountains, extended droughts, mega-fires, and catastrophically torrential rains. In this confluence of calamities, the humble beaver is emerging as a superhero. Their dams capture soil on its rush to the sea. This raises the beds of incised streams and reconnects them to floodplains. Beaver flowages emerge as bands of green in the monochrome landscape post-wildfire. Beavered river systems also spread and slow the rush of floodwaters. Beavers hold water, blessed water, upon the heating land. Little wonder that most of the presentations at the conference were by those working to bring beavers back to places that need them.

While I sit by the pond and wait for the beavers, I review my notes from the conference. Here are two snippets to share, the first from England where beavers are being reintroduced. If you're already thinking *Wind in the Willows*, continue in that direction and recall "Ratty," the