

It was July. The beaver kittens were two months old. For two years, their parents, Whiskers and Greenbrier, had been coming to eat poplar boughs and apples I placed along the stream, and they allowed their kits to approach me. Greenbrier, the father, though more cautious than his mate, had taken to coming out regularly an hour or two before sundown to continue work from where he had left off in the morning. Whiskers sometimes appeared early also, leaving the babies sleeping inside the lodge.

This particular afternoon, Whiskers sat near me, companionably grooming her fur and talking to me with a low murmur. Greenbrier was not in sight. Giving a final pat to her fur and a scratch to her eyebrows, Whiskers ambled down the bank and eased herself into the water. Just then ripples appeared above the underwater door of the lodge, and the baby beavers popped out—one, two, three, four—and swam purposefully toward their mother, who made a quick dive to avoid them. They promptly dived in around her, coming up in a roil of water and clinging to her fur.

Evidently Whiskers had had a hard day, and any human mother could have identified with her. It occurred to me that a few harsh words and a slap or two might go far. But Whiskers had other plans. Taking a long, thoughtful look my way she turned her back on me and the kittens and swam calmly away upstream.

I expected the kittens to follow her but they did not. Flipping their tails, circling and diving, they began to frolic in their home pool. The sun was still bright. The swamp was very green. A yellow-throat sang lightheartedly among the laurel, while downstream a family of young flickers whined

BEAVER BABY SITTER

by Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci



Author watching two baby beavers stuffing their mouths with poplar leaves.

Photo by Alfred A. Francesconi

and squeaked, commenting on the world outside their hole, which they were exploring for the first time.

What will Greenbrier say? I wondered. Ever wary, he might be disturbed at finding me alone with his youngsters. I did not have long to wonder. Greenbrier came plowing rapidly downstream, and he swam back and forth before me in the yellow afternoon light. He was disturbed indeed, and indicated his wrath by the most potent means at his command—mighty slaps of his tail.

At the first crack, two of the young dived into the lodge. The other two, playing farther away, continued to be absorbed in their game of wrestling, each trying to push the other backward into the water. Greenbrier circled again and again, giving a vigorous slap

at each turn. Whenever his frantic swimming brought him close to me I spoke softly to him. Otherwise, I kept myself strictly a part of the cedar root on which I sat.

At last he came closer and stared up at me intently, sniffing, with his tail quiet. For a full minute we looked each other in the eye. Then he turned, swam across the pool, dived under a log, and paddled back upstream—leaving the youngsters in my care.

Soon, out from the lodge came the two timid kittens, and all four clustered at my feet, stuffing their mouths with poplar leaves. Meanwhile, the sun had set and the moon, already high, shone through the cedars beyond the lodge, gleaming on the wavelets created by the active kittens. A bat flew overhead, uttering tiny cries. Mosquitoes hummed sharply, but I could not leave my post—I had been left in charge.

Whiskers finally returned, and her young ones hurried with eager cries to meet her. Swimming straight for the lodge, the mother tipped up and dived. The youngsters followed, leaving a glitter of bubbles in their wake. From inside the lodge came a chorus of whines and soft mews as the babies nestled in to nurse.

As the sounds became softer, I rose stiffly and splashed back through the swamp toward home. The dark was sparked with fireflies and alive with singing toads. A whippoorwill called. I would have liked to stay there forever, a baby sitter for beavers. ☐ ☐