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Chewing over three books about beavers

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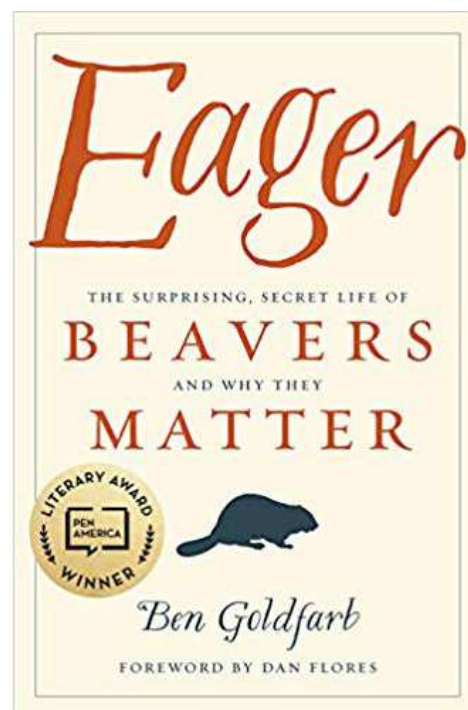
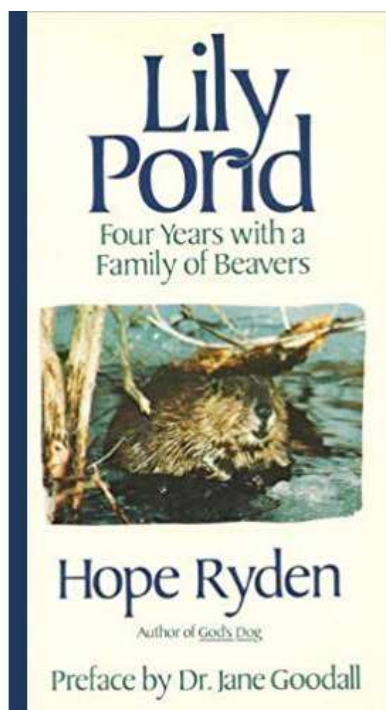
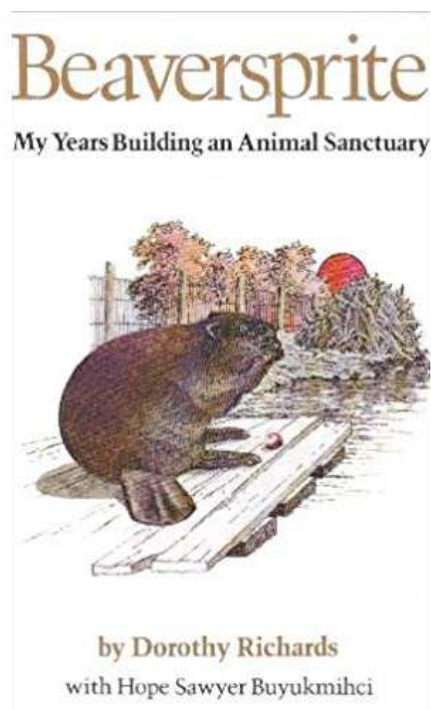
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BY BETSY KEPES (BOOK REVIEWER) (/NEWS/REPORTERS/60/BETSY-KEPES) & TODD MOE (/NEWS/REPORTERS /6/TODD-MOE) (WEEKDAY MORNING HOST AND PRODUCER), IN CANTON, NY

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Aug 14, 2019 — Traveling around the North Country it is easy to see the work of beavers - dams and ponds and sometimes flooded roads. Are these clever rodents a nuisance or a benefit to our landscape? Todd Moe talked with Betsy Kepes after she read three books about *Castor Canadensis*, the North American beaver.



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Betsy Kepes: Todd, the land behind my house in Pierrepont has an active beaver pond and I'm fascinated with how the beaver have changed the landscape there. I like to go out at dusk - which is when the beaver become - and watch the beavers swim around. And actually sometimes they swim up to me, which is cool. And I like to remember that 120 years ago there were only five beaver left in the entire state of New York, and only one at all in most of New England.

Todd Moe: Wait. Five beaver? That's all?

Betsy: Yes. They were so over-trapped, that's what we had left.

***Beaversprite*, Dorothy Richards**

Betsy: So the first book I read, *Beaversprite*, by Dorothy Richards - she was born in 1894 and never saw a beaver until the 1930s when the state conservation department imported a pair of beaver to her farm in the southern Adirondacks, part of the restocking effort. And then she fell in love.

Todd: Fell in love?

Betsy: With beavers. The first sentence of her book is "I'm writing this with a sixty-pound beaver in my lap."

Todd: Is this fiction?

Betsy: It sounds like it, right? No, this is a memoir that Richards wrote when she was in her 80s. She actually did have what she called "house beavers." One photo shows Richards having lunch and a beaver sitting across from her on a chair at the table eating apple slices off a plate. She also observed and fed beavers in the wild.

Todd: But isn't this what some people might call animal exploitation?

Betsy: It does sound like that to us now, but remember, she wrote this book over thirty years ago, and her subtitle is "My Years Building an Animal Sanctuary." Richards felt she needed to educate people about how intelligent beaver are. She actually had audiences that came to see her house beaver swimming around and moving around sticks. It

It sounds odd, but I really think this book is still worth reading. She loved beavers and animals and her stories are pretty amazing.

One of my favorites -she and her husband rescued a beaver that somebody had trapped in their pond. It was just about dead. They brought the beaver inside and put it in an upstairs bedroom. Not the best thing to do with a beaver. A few hours later they hear this big thunk and the beaver had chewed off a leg of their mahogany dresser and it fell over.

Todd: Which proves that beavers don't always make the best houseguests.

Betsy: Yeah, I think that's probably why they have never become pets.

Lily Pond—Four Years with a Family of Beavers, Hope Ryden

Betsy: But they are very intelligent and peaceful animals. And in the second book, Hope Ryden writes a much more scientific book and it's called *Lily Pond—Four Years with a Family of Beavers*.

Ryden is a wildlife biologist and she spent hours and hours at one beaver pond observing what initially was just two beavers, a couple. She had a perfect beaver-watching site in a state park in the Hudson highlands. The preface to the book is by Jane Goodall and Goodall wrote "I was entranced by *Lily Pond*." Which, I've got to say, I was too.

Todd: Coming from Jane Goodall, that's pretty high praise.

Betsy: It is, and I'm also not easily entranced. And I have to say Ryden is an excellent writer and a scientist. But she also tells this story with such humanity about this pair of beaver and four or five generations of their offspring. She observes them in all seasons - and this was great - one November she saw the beaver family like Zambonis, they were pushing the slush off the surface of their pond so it wouldn't freeze. She has lots of photos and in the photos I could begin to see the beavers as individuals, the way she did. She mourned when two-year-old Laurel was killed by a car and when three people tried to break into the beaver lodge she was just furious. She wrote "I shouted language at them I didn't know I knew."

Todd: Well, I have to say, not everyone loves beavers.

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Betsy: Yes we know that, like when they flood roads. A lot of people think, just kill them. They are big rodents; just kill them. But here's Ryden on the importance of beavers: "A beaver pond brews just the right nutrients to support a most complex tangle of life—a web of relationships that reaches onto land and stretches upward to sustain creatures of the air as well."

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Todd: I really like that. So, you have a third book about beavers to recommend?

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Eager —*The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter* by Ben Goldfarb

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Betsy: Yes, and this one is new. It's titled *Eager —The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter* by Ben Goldfarb. And in this book each chapter is part of a journey around the country to meet the people Goldfarb calls the "Beaver Believers."

Todd: Beaver Believers, sounds catchy, but what does he mean by that?

Betsy: Beaver Believers think beavers are amazing animals that can restore and enrich our environment, even in the arid southwest.

Todd: Beavers in the desert?

Betsy: I know; this really surprised me. Even though beavers were wiped out in most of North America with over-trapping they now live almost everywhere, except Florida and the far north of the Arctic. And they live in Utah. Here's what a Utah scientist said to Goldfarb, "Back East you have water no matter what, but we have streams that run dry. And beavers can just make wetlands appear here. They're kind of magic."

Todd: Magical beavers, the rodent engineers. Okay, if I only have time to read one of these three books, which one should I read?

Betsy: I'd read Hope Ryden's book, *Lily Pond*. It's very good with triumphs and tragedies amidst the science. And— this is embarrassing but true —I actually cried at the end when the matriarch beaver died.

Todd: So that makes you a Beaver Believer.

Betsy: You're right Todd, I am.

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Todd: Thanks for coming in Betsy.

Betsy: Anytime. I love talking about books.

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