

They All Call it Home

by Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci, 1970

One May evening at our wildlife refuge in New Jersey, I watched Greenbrier, a father beaver, working on his lodge. Inside were four newborn kittens which his mate, Whiskers, was nursing. I could hear their eager “mew-mew-mew.”

Greenbrier was busy with repair work. Swimming quietly out from the lodge, he dived deep and dug up an old cedar root. He towed it over to the base of the lodge. With his black tail waving he made another dive, coming up with paws and arms full of mud. He took the cedar root in his teeth and rose on his hind legs. Holding the mud under his chin, he waddled up the steep side of the lodge. He looked like a plump man climbing stairs with a huge bag of groceries.

Near the top he put his materials down and began to work. He jabbed the root into the mud-and-stick wall and arranged fresh mud around it, using his nose and paws as a trowel. Then he patted the mud into place. After looking over the job, he reached over and nipped off the end of a protruding stick and tucked the piece into the lodge wall. Then he turned and ambled down the side and slid smoothly into the water.

On the lodge were four muddy paths showing where Greenbrier had made trip after trip up the sides. He never put mud at the top. The center of the lodge top was an open lacework letting air through. In winter I had seen steam rising from the top like smoke from a chimney.

The lodge was beautifully landscaped. Red flowers of swamp maples made a gay canopy overhead. Rich yellow spears of golden club poked through the water nearby. In summer, purple loosestrife and sweet pepper bushes would grow from the lodge walls. The water all around would blossom with white water lilies, which are tasty. Ask any beaver!

Greenbrier came and went, bringing mud and sticks, and ripping cedar bark from the base of a tree to carry inside. From within the lodge came the mewing of the little beavers and the snip-snip of sharp teeth as Whiskers shredded the bark into bedding for them.

For an hour I sat 20 feet from the lodge, watching and listening. It was almost dark when with a light splash, a small brown creature came from the other side and swam away. She looked like a young beaver, except for her pointed nose, eyes set close together and slender tail wagging. This was a muskrat about the size of a half-grown cat. It swam to a tuft of swamp grass and began hungrily nibbling the fresh shoots.

Satisfied, she dived and brought up a mouthful of tender grass roots, then returned home. She dived again to be greeted by excited mews. The cries of her young were higher-pitched than those of the beaver kittens.

All was quiet after the first greeting. Then a small nose piked out of the water on my side of the lodge and a rat-sized youngster swam toward me. The young muskrat came right up to my boots. Rising in the water, he sniffed curiously at the rubber. Then he turned away and swam off among the grass and water plants.

Meanwhile another tenant of the beaver lodge, living in an airy penthouse apartment, was about to retire. This was a mother tree swallow, whose nest was in a hollow snag jutting up among the branches at the lodge center. After lining the hole with wild duck feathers, the mother bird had laid six white eggs. For two weeks she and her mate would take turns sitting on the eggs. She sat now at the door of her home while her mate glided in the air above her.

As the sun went down, a chill settled over the stream. A water snake who had been feeding on insects in the water came to the edge of the lodge. He looked around, then slipped quietly into a hole just his size in the thick dark wall.

Dusk fell and all was silent. The male tree swallow had found a roosting place and his mate had gone back to her eggs. Greenbrier was still doing repair work on his dam, and the muskrats were eating among the lilies - Whiskers nibbling with them. Inside the lodge the kittens were napping after their meal.

From a tiny crevice near the chimney of the lodge there appeared a mini-face with beady eyes and quivering whiskers. The face belonged to a furry, short-tailed mouse, who peeked this way and that before coming out. She looked like a little old lady stepping into traffic.

For half an hour I watched her come and go, tugging at pieces of grass and leavers and scampering back inside with them. Muffled squeals meant beds were being made for the young mice.

All of these creatures call the beaver lodge "home". Canada geese often nest on its top. Mink have been known to burrow in the walls and the tiny winter wren chooses a cranny for her mossy nest.

Greenbrier doesn't seem to mind. He builds his home, maintains it and goes his way. He lives in harmony with those who share it with him.