

Unexpected Beavers

by -- Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci



OCTOBER, A MOTHER BEAVER, takes an apple slice from human hands. Months of patient feeding have allayed her fears, but she is still constantly on the alert. Photo by William Vandivert.

Eighteen years ago, my husband Cavit and I were headed for Washington state, where we planned to raise our three children on a farm on the slopes of Mt. Baker. There, water fell musically over rocks, and fir trees towered. Bears munched fallen apples in an old orchard and a white rose bloomed in the dooryard. Years before, on our honeymoon, we had found there the ideal homestead.

Our dream had persisted through years of cramped living in Turkish cities. It had glowed bright on our

way back across the Atlantic. But when we arrived in Philadelphia with only a few dollars, it faded quietly away. The children needed food and shelter. My husband must find work at once. A trip across the country was impossible.

So we settled in South Jersey, where a friend's trailer became our first stateside home. Our children grew up among bogs and slow-moving streams instead of mountain freshets, and we gave up hope of seeing bears.

Unexpected Wildlife Refuge be-

gan when we bought the old Adams cranberry bog at the border of Gloucester and Atlantic counties, just off Unexpected Road. The water gate that had managed the cranberries had collapsed long before. And the bog would have been dry except for one thing: a solid dam built by beavers, who now inhabited a spacious pond. Freshly peeled sticks proved they were there; and often as we walked the shores at night we heard the slap of a tail as a beaver dived in alarm.

The beavers eventually became

the "bears" of our private wilderness. We came to know them and to love them. Gradually they learned to trust us, and now several generations of young have sat on my lap and taken food from my hand.

When the white man first came to America, 400 million beavers lived here, controlling the flow of streams with their dams and ponds. They were as much a part of the waterways as the water itself. Along the wooded streams, mother beavers cradled their young in their arms and crooned to them while the fathers worked to maintain their holdings. Regulating water levels for maximum protection of their homes, they unwittingly furnished ideal conditions for other creatures, with whom they lived in balance.

The white man, however, saw in the beaver only a pelt which could be traded for gold, and he systematically proceeded to destroy the beaver. In the early 1800's a trapper could count on getting at least 400 beavers a year. By 1900, only scattered beaver colonies remained. Fashion turned elsewhere for fur. Our beaverless rivers showed signs of the flood and drought which have plagued us increasingly since. And trapping, from being a full-time occupation, became more of a part-time hobby for those to whom killing an animal means some kind of fulfillment.

In New Jersey, beavers interfered with cranberry bogs and blueberry fields, industry and housing development. Man, instead of accommodating himself to them, destroyed them—and got paid for their by-product, fur. Our Fish and Game Division still takes in a few dollars annually from beaver-trapping permits. Completely ignoring the benefits of living, working beavers, they are selling our children's heritage for a mess of pottage, while our tax dollars flow in billions to "disaster relief" for victims of flood and drought, which in many instances beavers could have prevented. Beavers will be trapped in South Jersey again this February unless enough people rise up and say No.



MOTHER AND CHILD share fresh-cut willow twigs on an old dam upstream from the main pond. Many small dams, a few hundred feet apart all along the stream, provide water preservation, thus preventing flooding followed by drought.

Photo by Alfred A. Francesconi



BEAVER TOOTH MARKS on a sassafras. Beavers rarely cut sassafras, but for some reason they did cut this one, then left it. They feed on many aquatic plants, including waterlilies and marsh purslane, but in fall cut trees to store for winter food. (Photo by the author).

What we need most is a new attitude toward beavers. And one of the best ways I know is to protect a beaver colony and get to know them. Sure, they cut down trees, but new sprouts grow. Of course they dam up streams. Isn't that just what we need? Yes, they're big and ugly--and they're rodents. If they are so ugly, why do the "beautiful people" wear their fur as coats?

Once we get to know beavers, our attitudes change. Beaver kittens are usually born in May. For three days the mother stays in the lodge, gently caring for them, while her husband brings her "breakfast in bed". Then for a couple of weeks, the parents take turns foraging for food, one always on guard at the lodge. By that time the kittens, who have practiced swimming in the indoor pool, have emerged into the outdoors and begun to explore. At a month old, they are swimming alone quite far from home, or following their parents to choice feeding spots.

They love to play, wrestling being a favorite game. Until the age of two months, they depend on their mother for milk, comfort and sometimes entertainment. Often they approach her with a pleading voice, asking her to take them in her arms and roll with them underwater. They dive under her teasingly and climb on her back or tail for a ride. She teaches them to comb and oil their fur, and to watch constantly for danger. (A young beaver may become prey to a horned owl, but seldom does.)

For twelve years I have been a beaver-watcher, learning a bit here and there; longing to learn more. This year the beavers furnished a surprise.

Seated by the stream at sunset, I was feeding apple slices to October, a mother beaver, and her yearling offspring, Sprite. From a tangle of water willow a brown animal the size of a muskrat swam toward me and I found myself facing a beaver kit not more than four weeks old. Born four months late, and a rare only child (beaver litters are usually two to six), this little Postscript came swaggering out as if he owned the world. He would not accept food from my hand, but did

take a piece of apple from the end of a stick.

The third night he came cautiously to my hand. The fourth night

he swam right to me with a "Mew" of greeting. Soon he was resting his small black hand on my fingers and letting me pet his wet fur.



*SPRITE, A YEARLING BEAVER KIT, looking for a hand-out of apples.
(Photo by Cavit Buyukmihci)*



SOUTH JERSEY BEAVER LODGE IN WINTER. Food pile of branches, butt ends buried in underwater mud, is stored beyond and to left of lodge. Except during unusual cold spells, beavers are active all winter, often breaking ice to keep their channels open. (Photo by Alfred A. Francesconi)



Lori Faust

SILVER, DIAMONDS AND GOLD

There is silver in the moonlight
Where the beaver casts his wake;
And the wood duck's bill drips diamonds
When the day begins to break.
Then at noon the water flashes
Where the swimming otters go;
And at dusk the gold of sunset
Paints a jeweled afterglow.

— Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci

The Beaver Defenders, Newfield, N. J. 08344.

Now, as P.S. comes swimming to meet me, I hope someone else is enjoying the western homestead I dreamed of, while I sit contentedly in South Jersey communing with beavers whom I had never hoped to see.

As fourth-grade school children have aptly put it: "Beavers turn wilderness into happiness."

It is the aim of The Beaver Defenders to preserve beavers from persecution and to make sure that

children, present and future, may get to know them first-hand. While reaching for the moon, let us not forget that beavers belong on our waterways; that they not only provide high water tables with minimum flooding, but that their presence as friends and neighbors can be a joy. ●

EDITOR'S NOTE--

Author, lecturer, artist, Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci formed The Beaver

Defenders in April 1970. They welcome donations to help support the drive to save the beaver. Any donation is tax-deductible as they are a project of Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, Inc., a non-profit charitable organization.

Membership in The Beaver Defenders is \$5.00 annually for adults and \$3.00 for juniors. With this membership you receive their monthly newsletter.

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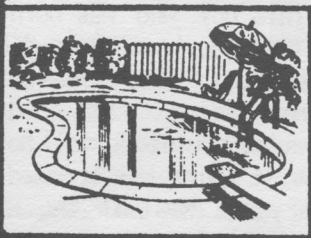
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