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THE BRAVE BEAVER

Instinct told the beaver what he must do
to save the kittens. Courage enabled him to do it.

By HOPE SAWYER BUYUKMICH

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It was late winter at Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, the New Jersey wilderness area my husband and I share with beavers, raccoons, birds and many other woodland creatures. One particularly cold night I went out to take photographs of the gray foxes, who often come and go like shadows on the moonlit snow.

Shivering, I waited silently next to our stream and near the beaver lodge. When beavers build a dam, they make a platform on it, just above the water level, and that forms the floor of the lodge they build of mud and branches. Now the lodge was snowbound. And I knew that locked inside, protected from the cold, were the four young beaver kittens I had fed and played with at the side of the stream all the previous summer.

In the stillness came muffled whines from within the lodge. Then splashes, as a beaver dived to visit

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the underwater pantry, succulent branches stored beneath the ice...Then mingled voices and gnawing as the beaver family ate...Then a lively chorus: the voices of the beaver kittens snug in their winter lodge, singing like children...Muted by the thick walls of branches and mud, their melodious quartet carried such joy that I felt awed by their wild innocence.

Abruptly, all around me, came the sounds of ice contracting as the temperature dropped—violent, ripping snaps, like canvas being torn by a giant's hands. In that white, frigid world I felt a strange uneasiness although I was on my own land, among familiar creatures. The weather seemed pitted against all living things.

The kittens...What if the ice should close in on the dam and seal it? Then the backed-up water might flood the lodge and drown them. Fear for the kittens gripped me.

Suddenly a turbulence erupted in

the water below the dam. A dark form emerged, and I recognized Greenbrier, the father beaver. Braving a current that almost swept him away, he pushed through the water. Lowering his head, he set to work with determination to gnaw the ice that threatened his dam. While the water swirled black and swift about him, he struggled, grinding away with his jaws to keep a channel open. He had recognized the danger to his home and family, and he knew what had to be done.

It was a time of vivid contrast. While the kittens sang in comfort in the lodge, their father dared bitter cold and raging water to keep them safe. I knew the youngsters would live to see spring. For two hours I forgot my numb discomfort and listened to the voices from within the lodge while I mentally cheered Greenbrier on in his dangerous work. Finally, I took up my gear and crunched homeward, marveling at the instinctive courage I had witnessed. ■

