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Kim Sturla

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Meet The Beaver Defenders

LAST MONTH, I had the pleasure of spending a few days at the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey, which is also home base for The Beaver Defenders organization, a special-interest group to help protect this unjustly maligned animal.

I had never seen beavers in the wild before, and this was my chance. The founder of The Beaver Defenders, Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci, escorted me to one of the many lodges located on the refuge. Midday, however, was not the opportune time to view beavers, Hope said. She explained we would have to return at night when they come to collect their poplar branches.

We returned after sunset, prepared for the below-freezing temperature and the beavers. Bundled down with my long underwear, sweater, coat, mittens and cap, flashlight and camera, I was ready for this first encounter. After a short wait that seemed like hours in the intolerable cold, one of the beavers came swimming up to shore to collect his eve-

Animals

ning snack. Unfortunately I spooked the little guy with my flashlight and he immediately slapped his tail on the water, a warning signal of danger, and disappeared.

TIME PASSED. As I was feeling sorry for myself because I was sure I was going to freeze to death, the hungry beaver returned. I guess the enticement of the poplar branches overrode his fear of me. I tried to catch a glimpse of him with just the natural moonlight. I barely saw his silhouette but clearly heard his gnawing on the poplar treat left for him. I slowly stood up while Hope flashed the light on him and spoke to him in her reassuring voice. The beavers know Hope, as she has lived at the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge for years where she and her husband, Cavit, have put all their resources and time into protecting wildlife. The beavers know she is not one to be feared but they weren't quite sure of me.

During our evening out Hope spoke enthusiastically about her favorite animals.

The beaver of whom I had just caught a glimpse was just a kid, Hope thought, weighing 30 pounds or so. Of course, the most intriguing anatomical structure of beavers is their tall tail. It's naked and scaly and shaped like a paddle. The large flat tail and webbed hind feet aid them in



From teeth to tail, the anatomy of the beaver is an intriguing one.

swimming. It also serves them in a variety of other ways. Folded in front of them it is used as a seat. When the beaver sits upright to feed or groom it is an effective prop. When swimming, it is a rudder, and when danger is near it is used as a warning device by slapping it hard against the water's surface, making a loud noise.

I WAS DELIGHTED to hear from Hope that beavers are members of the rodent family, cousin to my favorite animal, the rat. Like the rat, they have very large front teeth that grow continuously. Constant gnawing is needed, therefore, to keep their teeth worn down. Therefore, chewing through tree trunks is not only how they collect food and building materials but also how they keep their old choppers healthy.

Being strict vegetarians, beavers like to dine on bark, leaves and twigs. Their favorite delicacies include aspen, poplar, willow, alder, birch, and magnolia. They only eat the bark, buds and leaves. They do not eat the interior of the trunk, but they don't waste it. They shred it to make bedding for their lodges.

Beavers are famous for being hydraulic engineers and tireless builders. Hope described to me how they shape their environment to fit their needs. They use some of the trees and branches they cut down to construct dams across streams and use others to build their lodges. Their homes measure from 5 to 35 feet in diameter with a height of three to seven feet above the water line. The lodge I saw was of modest proportion, nothing extravagant.

It seems that every fall the beavers strengthen their lodge and the dam that holds back the stream. They add more branches and fill the cracks with mud. Water trapped behind the dam forms a quiet pond. If the dam should break, the water level would drop and the beaver's lodge would be without protection.

If you would like to join The Beaver Defenders for just \$5 a year or would simply like to know more about them, just write to Hope at The Beaver Defenders, Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, Newfield, NJ 08344.