

Lake Dismal in June

My hike to visit the beavers of Lake Dismal on Tuesday marked the beginning of my third June of watching and interacting with this beaver family. With two years behind me, I can begin to anticipate certain events and behaviors, but each visit brings fresh observations and new questions. The more I learn, the more there is to wonder about, it seems.

Among the things I can now predict is that I am likely to be greeted by a small stampede of beavers when I arrive at the pond. On June 1 they did not disappoint. I took a seat and unpacked amidst the bumbling beavers. The two adults, Willow and Bunchberry, welcomed me as a benevolent figure, the bearer of exotic delicacies. Snowberry, the kit from last year, remained more circumspect, but just as eager. Until very recently, she would retreat to the pond once I sat down, and would await apples delivered from the heavens. On June first she demonstrated her new skill, and took apples from my hand.

Hand-feeding Snowberry helps to compensate for a curious beaver trait I have become familiar with; because their diet is composed mainly of large, stationary objects, beavers have not honed the skills that help other animals locate food. The food I bring is quite small, and seems to make no visual impression upon them at all; they rely entirely on olfactory information to find my treats. What's more, the beaver nose is an imprecise organ, leading them back and forth, slowly homing in on the food. You would think an apple tossed conspicuously to a spot within a few feet of the intended recipient would send out a visual beacon. Not so. Snowberry

would pick up the scent, swim toward the apple, swim past the apple, end up on top of the apple, and would often give up the search, returning to gaze beseechingly at the purveyor of fruits. Now she has learned that apples can always be found near the base of the large stationary object that sometimes sits on the shore. She has learned to stalk carefully toward me until her nose bumps the apple. After a second's pause, she will grasp the apple in her teeth, and will then turn and waddle briskly back to the safety of the water.

Two noteworthy events occurred in May, and have changed the colony dynamics. On May 8, Willow gave birth to kits. A day or two later, Ducky, the two-year old, disappeared. Because last June Ducky supervised her new siblings at Surprise Pond, I entertained the hope that she had assumed responsibility for this brood, too. When she made no appearance for two weeks, I put greater stock in another possibility; the arrival of a new generation had cued little Ducky to begin the dangerous adventure of independence.

I am hopeful that this third June will bring observations that were not possible in previous years. During my first summer of beaver watching, when I sat down within fifty feet of the nursery lodge, Willow gave a very funny performance, huffing and blowing, and almost dancing in agitation. I feel fairly sure she was suggesting I find another place to sit. Last June, I watched baby-season activities from a discreet location across the pond from the nursery. This June, given the trust bestowed upon me by the beaver parents, I have no qualms about sitting right next to the lodge to await the debut of the kits, and it is apparent that the beavers experience no anxiety about this arrangement, either.

On this June first, I decided to try another advance in my relationship with the beavers—I would offer my services as a groom. Since beavers spend a great deal of time grooming, I hoped such overtures would not be unwelcome. During the first spring of beaver watching, Willow informed me that advancing hands were construed as threatening. Valuing my digits and our relationship, I kept my hands to myself since then. Given what we have learned about each other in the ensuing seasons,



I now felt confident that any reprimand would come in the form of a huff of warning or an indignant retreat. While Willow sat next to me and ate, I lightly draped my arm along her back. She continued to eat. I lifted the arm and resettled it a few times. Her reaction was the same. I then allowed my fingers to burrow a bit into her damp coat. No response. I made so bold as to stroke her back. She seemed indifferent. Indifference is not the preferred response when intimacies are offered, still, I considered it a good start.

Perhaps, during this third June, Willow will discover that rubs behind the ears are almost as nice as the beaver treats I bring her. Perhaps I will find Ducky settled nearby, or encounter her far afield searching for a mate. Perhaps the new kits will appear tonight. There is one prediction I am able to make with confidence; the comforts of familiarity and the ever-evolving mysteries of life will continue to beckon me to the shores of these ponds for many Junes to come. These shores also promise immersion in a world where lives take place oblivious to oil spills and the other rampant assaults on nature. These interludes provide the sustenance I need to return to a world where such things are harder to forget. May you all have such places and experiences to keep you this June, and in the Junes to come.