

Ducky Diary

Ducky, the beaver, made her Reformer debut in 2008 when I described our first encounters; she was a fluffy kit then, enjoying her first seasons of life. This same beaver appeared most recently in my April column this year, in which I described relocating her after months of disheartening searching. She and her mate, Growler, had spent their first winter together in a little pond at the headwaters of a tiny stream. Now, as the seasons change again, I can report on Ducky's trials and triumphs in the months that have ensued.

I rely on my beaver journal to recreate the sequence of events, its smudged pages record not just the activities of the beavers, but which birds are singing, which plants are blooming, and other events of the day. These brief entries have the curious power to evoke the sights, sounds, and smells of each visit and the ambiance of the season.

On April 18, I noted "I arrive in light rain, sunset. A robin sings with gusto." I reported on the beavers in a similar abbreviated style. When I scan these words, the pond reappears before me in its April colors—the warm hues of sedges and leaf litter flattened by snow—and I hear the robin's irrepressible evening song. The journal reminds me that I conducted a sapling taste test that evening, allowing Ducky to choose between beech and striped maple. Ducky took a nibble of the striped maple, and then excised a four-foot section of the beech and began to eat the bark. In my mind I hear the rapid chopping of her teeth. Growler, her still-wary mate, also appears in my memory and scrapes together a scent-mound on the far shore.

My journal returns me to the pond on May 1, where I find false hellebore springing up along the streams and beaked hazel and dwarf ginseng blooming in the woods. From my couch in late November, I smell the warming earth and hear the whistling wings of a pair of wood ducks rising from the pond. As the light fades the first peepers begin their hopeful calls. Growler finally acknowledges me, and I almost hear his "hummy-growly" noise as he joins Ducky and eats striped maple.

On May 28, the journal notes, I arrived in the morning, not expecting to see the nocturnal beavers. In warm, bright summer light, I settle once again on the shore across from the lodge. As I do, a beaver speeds through the water from the bank beneath my feet, slaps its tail, and then turns and swims back into the tunnel. I wondered if this

new den location was evidence that the pair now had kits. That morning I also recorded a synchronized dragonfly metamorphosis; the shrubs around me were decorated with emptied larval exoskeletons and dragonflies getting their bearings in their new winged bodies. I now hear again the soft short trills of the cedar waxwings that pick off the dragonflies as they take their first unsteady flights.

I did not make it back to check on Ducky until the middle of August. She, Growler, and any progeny, were gone.

I began my search for Ducky again, and managed to locate three sites where beavers had recently settled. Among these was a pond on a remote hillside almost three miles, as the trout swims, from their former home. As I approached this pond for my first evening visit, I saw a beaver sitting by the shore. It swam off toward the middle of the pond, but did not give a warning tail slap. When I sat down and unpacked the apples, the beaver swam over. I had found Ducky. A second beaver continued his business, unconcerned—Growler. I saw no kits that night, nor any on subsequent visit.

To reach their new pond, these beavers would have passed through the territory occupied by Ducky's parents, and thus were the likely catalysts of events logged in the journal in mid-July. During a week of stifling heat, Bunchberry and Willow were out at all hours, frequently slapping with their tails, and emitting the huffing sounds they make when they are annoyed. They also began scent-marking a half-mile stretch of their brook. Several days later I noticed that Bunchberry was limping and had an oozing wound on his front shoulder, I suspect the result of a skirmish with Growler.

On November 28, I made a last visit to Ducky for the season. My journal entry notes that it was rainy and warm. Two peepers called as I approached the pond. Ducky ate apples and towed a sapling to the food cache outside their lodge. No kits seen.

When the thaw arrives next March, and I pick up my journal and read that last entry, I will return to November and a night made soft and close by the warm rain and mist. I will see again the dazzling jeweled beaver, for the countless tiny droplets beading Ducky's dense, fine inner coat, sparkled in the beam of my headlamp.

Once again Ducky will launch herself into the deeper water, paddle out to the floating sapling, and position

herself to seize the butt end between her teeth. With a few forceful tugs, Ducky and the tree will achieve momentum and move toward the lodge. I will not see Ducky as she works her sapling into the big pile of branches but I will hear the splashing of her efforts. As the journal ends, I will hear the squeak-whine beavers make when they talk to each other—Ducky and Growler by their new lodge, ready for another winter.

