

Snowberry and the Beaver Deceiver



Any day now, Snowberry, who first paddled out of the lodge on Surprise Pond two years ago, will set out on her own. If the beaver gods are with her, she will find a mate and a territory in some remote stream nearby. If these gods are on the ball, Snowberry will not be their sole beneficiary, for a suite of wetland species will inhabit her new pond, and forest denizens will also benefit from the increased habitat diversity that accompanies beavers. I don't place a great deal of faith in the gods of beavers, however. Fortunately, large damp rodents have a more reliable ally in Skip Lisle, Grafton resident and founder of Beaver Deceivers International.

The backyard of Skip's house overlooks a lush pondscape. A framed panoramic photograph taken in 1970s shows the pond as Skip's parents designed it, a grassy lawn surrounding the shore, short vertical banks dropping to the water, a habitat offering few attractions to the wild occupants of the area. Despite the pond's sterility, a family of beavers arrived in the pond one day, as beavers will, and thought they could make something of the place. Skip's father did not share the beavers' plan, and ordered the young Skip to shoot them. Skip shot two of the beavers, but found the task so unsettling that he refused to finish the job. Over the ensuing years, the pond began to change, growing larger, the steep banks submerging, and wetland vegetation emerging from the widening shoreline. The younger Mr. Lisle was pleased. So were the moose, deer, and bears he could see foraging in the new growth on the far shore.

When Skip enrolled in graduate school to study wildlife biology he made beavers his specialty, and upon graduation set off to work for the Penobscot Nation. The Penobscot lands, largely wet, flat, remote from people, and aspen-rich, were also rich in beavers. This great abundance of beavers made it very difficult to maintain roads. Skip worked with the Penobscot for six years, and developed and perfected the flow control devices he called beaver deceivers, a name now used widely for all similar structures. The task was daunting, with the beavers only too happy to point out his design flaws. Because of his commitment to beavers and the ecological and hydrological benefits their presence brings to a landscape, he refused to fail.

Skip learned that each situation requires its own design, but he used two basic structures in most of his installations. To prevent beavers from clogging culverts, heavy-gauge wire cages force the beavers to dam well back from the culvert. In addition, a large plastic pipe, its intake located nearer the middle of the pond, drains off any water above its set level. Thus, the pond level cannot rise above the level of the drain, and water can flow freely through the culverts. He works with materials that will last for at least thirty years. To protect trees and shrubs, Skip has found that a simple fence of eight gauge ungalvanized wire mesh, two feet high, deters the beavers, and is rigid enough that it can just be pushed into the ground.

Twenty years ago Skip moved back to Grafton and back into his childhood home. He installed beaver deceivers throughout the town, and now beavers and the Grafton road crew coexist harmoniously. Skip has travelled across the country engineering compatibility between the plans of two species that have many plans. And yes, the other beneficiaries are innumerable.

Beavers can only create ponds on low gradient streams, the very watercourses that long ago carved the easiest travel routes through our



hilly region. Beavers had already been trapped out when the first roads were hewn. By the time beavers returned to their ancestral grounds their brooks were criss-crossed by roads that rumbled with automobiles, and many of their former pond sites had been put to use by people. The beaver “welcome mat” had been rolled up and stowed.

There are still many places along the back roads of this region where beaver ponds can be seen. In most of these, the beavers themselves are shot or trapped soon after they arrive. In a few places, however, the beavers appear to be welcomed and protected. These ponds have become scenic treasures and habitat showcases. Many drivers stop to admire the wood ducks, kingfishers, herons, geese, and beavers. Thanks to Skip’s diligent research, most land use conflicts between people and beavers can be resolved humanely, and if we all spread the word, such ponds may again proliferate.

Last night, I paid my own favorite beaver pond a visit just as thunderstorms lumbered off on their journey east. Blue sky appeared in patches above mist that glowed with twilight. Willow, the colony matriarch, emerged from the lodge at my call and swam over to join my picnic, leaving her new kits behind. A short while later, Snowberry also arrived. While her mother continued to relax on the shore with me, Snowberry took her apple back to the lodge, an uncharacteristic act that suggested she was on babysitting duty.

When Snowberry does decide to set out on her own, I can take comfort in the knowledge that should she settle in hostile territory, I can bring Skip Lisle’s experience to the diplomatic table on her behalf. —*Patti Smith*

