

# A Good Night with an old friend

Every hour spent in nature is unique, even in familiar places—the cast of characters, the lighting, the temperature are ever shifting. Still, after eleven years spent on the shores of beaver ponds, I have few truly novel experiences. The last evening in July, however, was so remarkable that I wish you could have been there. If you were with me, you would have been sitting on the roof of a derelict beaver lodge next to Willow, the old beaver who has been my companion for more than 10 years.

I was especially happy because I feared today's column would be her obituary. A month ago she disappeared and, though I searched all of the places she had historically occupied, I couldn't find her. Given that she is remarkably old for any wild animal, at least sixteen and likely older, I have been preparing myself for years for her loss. I held out hope, since she seemed in fine condition this spring and had even given birth to a kit, but the disappearance of both Willow and her kit worried me all summer.

When my woods-rambling neighbors stopped by to say they had just spotted the old beaver in a little pond on the hillside, I was elated and headed up for a visit. Several weeks ago, the spot was a meadow. That night I arrived at a pretty pond, buzzing with dragonflies. The bottled gentians still blooming beneath the water indicated how recently this little bowl had flooded. The only place to sit by the steep edge of the pond was on the roof of a lodge that other beavers had built here seven years ago. I could see that fresh branches had been dragged onto it and that it had been smeared with several armloads of mud.

As I settled onto the sturdiest part of the lodge, I saw a beaver on the other side of the pond. When it dove, I saw the miniature paddle-tail of a baby beaver. Willow's kit had survived! Soon Willow arrived, hoisted herself up onto the roof and flopped down beside me to enjoy the treats I brought her. Then her mate Henry approached. We don't know each other well, so I was pleased when he pushed his way through the brush and joined our picnic.

The next character to arrive on the scene was a great blue heron. She soared in and alighted on the far side of the pond. I knew that I was very visible and expected her to take off again at once. Rather than remaining still, I spoke quietly and adopted the manner of idle relaxation I use to appear least like a predator. The fact that the pond beavers considered me harmless must have weighed in

my favor with the heron who, after remaining statue-still for five minutes, relaxed and began hunting.

Henry took an apple and swam into the lodge. When I heard him chewing, I realized just how porous the lodge was. I could see him through a skylight. Apple finished, he began digging to enlarge the chamber and pushed up on the roof beneath me with his considerable bulk and strength. I felt a bit guilty for exacerbating the roof sag, but enjoyed being shoved by a beaver.

The heron moved to the north end of the pond and crouched in hunting posture. Light was beginning to fade. A hermit thrush sang.

The beavers' attention shifted to their dam. The kit reappeared and imitated her father as he dug sod from the far bank and packed it onto the growing impoundment.

The heron, meanwhile, had rounded the corner and began fishing on my steep side of the pond. Could the bird be as curious about me as I was about her? I played it cool, pretending I didn't notice her.

After taking some notes, I saw the heron behind a dead tree just twenty feet away. I gave my peripheral vision a workout as the heron stalked to within ten feet of the lodge. With a lightning stab and a splash, she snapped up a little frog. There could be no more pretending we didn't see each other. I looked over and mentioned that I was quite fond of frogs. She looked back at me, dipped her beak into the water and swished it back and forth to remove any stray amphibian parts. Satisfied that she had taken my measure, the heron spread her broad wings and sailed across the pond to resume hunting where she started.

