

Beaver Moon

The November full moon, the Beaver Moon, rose on a frigid night above a snow-covered land. It shone down on a small new pond on a mountainside and on a group of hardy adventurers who waited by an opening in the ice for a beaver to emerge.

I had reason to think they would not be disappointed; I had been there earlier in the day, enlarged the hole in the ice, and called until my old friend, Willow, found the opening and hauled herself out. Beneath the Beaver Moon, however, I was beginning to feel like Linus waiting for the Great Pumpkin, and Charlie Brown and friends were losing faith.

At last, I started a fire and all gathered around to enjoy the warming blaze. I wandered back over to the hole in the ice and there found Willow. This beaver thinks of humans as benevolent creatures, a misapprehension that does her no harm because she lives so far from them. She will clamber out of her pond to greet a group of any size. Beneath the Beaver Moon, she lounged on the snow and munched treats while sixteen people admired her.

Moonlight on snow, a blaze of fire, deep in a wild place—I have long tried to pinpoint what it is about these experiences that fuel my soul. On such nights and in such places we are again small animals in a big wild world.

The Beaver Moon also rose this year on Black Friday, the day the White House released the second volume of the National Climate Assessment. Despite the Trump administration's efforts to pooh-pooh climate change, the report issued dire warnings about impacts on human health, the economy, agriculture, and nature. Here is an excerpt that worries me: "By 2035, and under both lower and higher scenarios (RCP4.5 and RCP8.5), the Northeast is projected to be more than 3.6°F (2°C) warmer on average than during the pre-industrial era. This would be the largest increase in the contiguous United States and would occur as much as two decades before global average temperatures reach a similar milestone." We cannot take snowy forests for granted anymore.

One thing Northeasterners experience already is more frequent extreme weather. Several days after the cold of the Beaver Moon, heavy snow fell in the mountains, taking down trees and power lines. I decided it was time to dismantle my beaver camp for the year. I skied to my campsite to dig a flattened tent from the heavy, wet snow.

What I saw first was Willow, her deep mahogany fur radiant against the white and green of the spruce forest. She had been busy cutting a yellow birch into portable sections and paused to tune her ears and nose to the task of confirming my identity. This done, she waddled over eagerly for snacks.

I was surprised to see her out working in the middle of the afternoon. Does she know that this year there is no time to lose to get winter stores gathered in? I'm pretty sure she doesn't know that climatic instability in the Arctic may result in northern cold being pushed to the south, one of the many inconsistencies of climate change. I'm fairly sure she is also unaware that the wetlands she creates are a climate change mitigation 'two-fer;' the water she slows and holds on the landscape has a local cooling effect, and the sediment, peat, and woody debris that build up in her wetlands are a carbon sink.

Nature is expert at removing carbon from the atmosphere and putting it to work building carbon-based life-forms, we need to give her as much space as possible to do this good work. That means reducing the amount of heat-generating paved surfaces, growing food on land that is also building soil, leaving forests in place and planting more I hope fervently that humanity will rise to this challenge. This work will be fueled by bright possibilities for a better world. I will be hoping for more wild snowy nights beneath a Beaver Moon.

