

All is Safely Gathered In

While I have mixed feelings about Thanksgiving's origins, I appreciate a holiday that focuses on gratitude, in particular gratitude for well provisioned cellars, larders, woodsheds, and the health of family and community. Even though very few of us still depend upon our own harvest for survival, the season brings with it the humbling reminder that we all ultimately rely upon the bounty of the earth.

While I enjoy the traditional family feasts, I also enjoy visits to my unusual extended family, the beavers I have been observing for the past decade. They are drawing to the end of their harvest season, and will soon be entering the long quiet time of ice and cold. Their success will depend upon their own industry and the generosity of the land.

There was a wintry nip in the air just before Thanksgiving as I set out to visit the beaver family at Jenny Lake Heights. I had been two long weeks since I made it up to their remote pond. To get there, I cross an old beaver dam bridge used by many species traveling this east-west route. Over the course of the summer, an unknown beaver had been dabbling at the small pond above this dam—nibbling the steeple bush, making minor repairs. When I approached the dam crossing on this night, I found the water level higher and the dam longer. A new lodge had arisen from the still water, and a cache of branches could be seen by the entrance to the lodge. Nearly all of the shrubs below the dam had been removed and the old bridge looked well-groomed. As I admired the transformation I saw the occupant of this fine little realm paddling across the pond. I announced myself, still hoping this beaver would prove to be one of my familiars, but, as usual, he dove and headed for the lodge. Then a second beaver appeared from the north, and this one paddled, unswervingly, toward me.

In the gloaming, she appeared to be that most recognizable of beavers, Willow. I turned on my flashlight as she hauled herself ashore, and noted the sunken eye, the notched tail, and the boxy muzzle of the beaver I first met ten years ago. This pond is up a tributary from the brook that has long been her home, and I have never seen her near this spot before. In late October, she seemed to be setting up housekeeping in one of her former locations, so I was surprised to see her in this unlikely spot, surprised and delighted.

Willow was the first beaver I met when I decided to get to know the local beavers. At the time, she and her growing clan occupied a territory that encompassed a half mile of wild stream valley. Beginning in 2013, her fortunes changed. By the end of that summer, she and two-year-old Sundew were the only beavers that remained, and I suspect that the local predators had added beaver to their menu. The next year, Willow was alone. Though she has had a few mates since then, there have been no more kits, and for the past three winters, Willow has lived in a lodge of such modest proportions I have never known for sure where it was. By my calculations, she is at least 14 years old, but suspect she is approaching the maximum life span for a beaver, just over twenty years.

One of the last times I wrote about this beaver was in the spring three years ago. At the time, she had survived a tough winter alone, and emerged thin and covered with ticks. I wrote about the bittersweet juxtaposition of a creature nearing life's end and the fecundity of spring. What a triumph to find this old beaver this year, in the season of decline, well provisioned and looking fat and healthy.

When I left Willow, and continued to Jenny Lake Heights, I found the family of four beavers there also well-prepared for winter, and if beavers could be grateful, I'm sure they would be. I certainly was. I hope that you and your families are all doing as well as to head into the slow, quiet season

—Patti Smith.

