

The View From Heifer Hill—December 2010

HIGH WATER

After a damp beginning to the month of December, I invite you to cast your mind back to summer—those long, dry weeks when streams dried to trickles and green leaves drooped on their twigs. The beaver ponds became shallow, ringed by wide swathes of exposed mud. I wondered if the dry conditions would force my beaver family to abandon their tradition of moving to a new home each winter. With no running water to dam, they might be forced to spend a second winter at Lake Dismal.

On September 26 it began to rain. By the time it stopped the beaver ponds were full and the streams were high. What would the beavers do? When the storm's energy waned, I took a friend to find out.

We stopped first at the pond where two-year old Ducky and her mate, Growler, had set up house-keeping. After Ducky came over for her apples, Jim and I set off for Lake Dismal, a half-mile upstream, where her parents and siblings lived. At Lake Dismal, though water thundered over the dam, there was a strange stillness—no mob of eager beavers greeted us. Upstream from the din I called to them, and at last a little beaver paddled down the stream. Dewberry, the kit, appeared to have been left behind while the others went off to celebrate their riches of opportunity.

On my next visit, two days later, I followed the stream to Lake Dismal. I found ample evidence that beavers had been on the move. Fresh mounds of mud and vegetation had been pushed up in many places and were redolent of beaver. I put some of this mud in a plastic bag to see how the Lake Dismal beavers would respond. Did it belong to one of them or to an outsider like Growler?

I reached Lake Dismal at dusk, and all four beavers greeted me. They let me know the mud was theirs. Soon they were settled in and relaxed, enjoying the picnic. A few mice scampered about busily, stashing sunflower seeds. Wood frogs clucked from the woods nearby, restored by the rain. A porcupine wandered in the dark whining to itself. When the



Dewberry looks for more apples

beavers finished their snack, the adults returned to their logging operation on the far shore. Dewberry strolled behind me to rummage through my pack, walked around to the front and gave my boot a taste, and then sat up, put her paws in my lap and looked into my face. No more apples?

All had returned to normal. The only sign of the beavers' adventure was a hole in Bunchberry's cheek, just the size one would expect from a beaver bite. Several nights passed before I could return to Lake Dismal. When I did, only the mice appeared.

The next morning I headed out to look for any sign of beavers. The large dam just upstream from Ducky's pond had recent improvements. As I sloshed through the wet meadow behind it, I saw a beaver in the stream channel. Ducky? The beaver that paddled over was baby Dewberry! I would learn that the Lake Dismal clan had staked claim to the finest habitat in the brook. Ducky and Growler were gone.

On my next visit, I encountered the yearling Snowberry, she came ashore and huffed, then charged at me and stamped her feet. I held out an apple. She

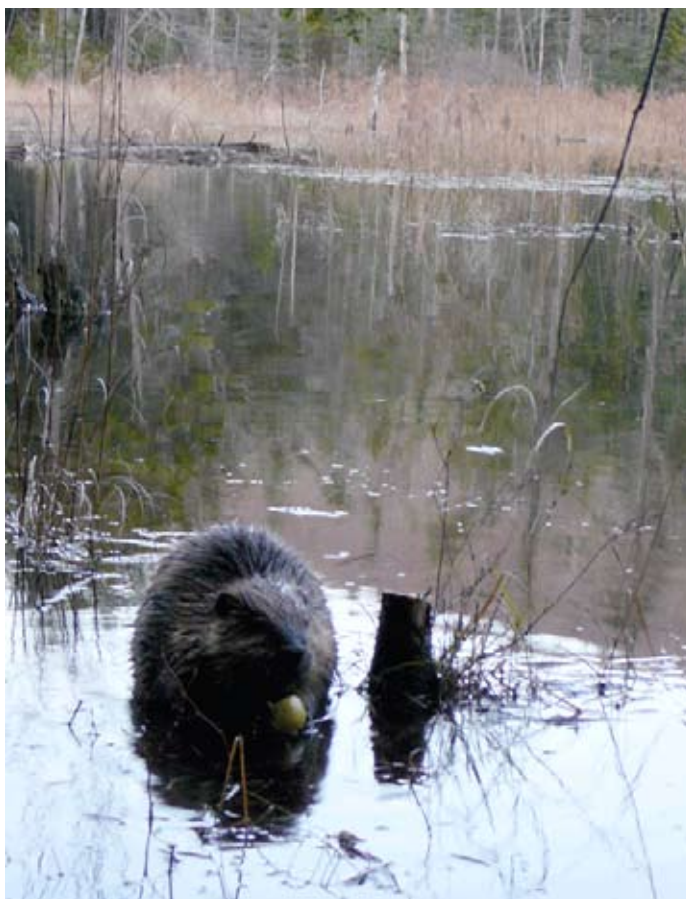
took it, and continuing to blow and glare at me, she carried it to the shore to eat. The confused yearling seemed to be in warrior mode. As a member of the conquering clan, perhaps she had been expected to drive her own sister away. Did she see me as another familiar but no-longer-welcome community member?

If Ducky had been on her own, she probably would have rejoined her family. Beavers recognize close relations by scent even if they haven't met before. According to the beaver literature, these family members are welcomed. Not so outsiders. Had Ducky and Growler teamed up to defend their pond? Bunchberry's battle wounds (I found another injury behind his shoulder) suggest that Growler, at least, tried to guard their territory.

It would be more satisfying to condemn the beavers' territorial dispute if it weren't so similar to the way humans behave. Furthermore, suitable territory is a strict limiting factor in the beaver economy. Unless beavers live in a large river or lake, they are restricted to streams with narrow parameters for gradient and flow. Food resources along such streams are also limited. The long-term success of my beaver colony is likely tied to their monopoly of the habitat of this small stream.

I now walk just a quarter mile to visit the beavers. From the shores of their big new pond I can watch the moon rise through the naked trees on the far ridge. This week the beavers have been making dramatic entrances, breaking up from the water through a cascade of shattering ice. Willow and Bunchberry then settle beside me and calmly chew beaver nuggets. They let me dig my fingers into the dense silky undercoat that keeps them warm and dry in the frigid water. Dewberry and Snowberry eat halved apples in the water nearby. They come ashore for refills. Snowberry touches the toe of my boot with her nose and then waits. Dewberry strides up and puts her paws on my lap. Behind them, in the middle of the pond, I can see their refurbished lodge and the top of their food cache. They are ready for winter in their new pond.

I have not relocated Ducky, although I have extended my search into the neighboring drainages. In the process I have found that the beavers from two of the only three other occupied sites in the area are also gone. I hope that the high water just got everyone moving, and that I will eventually find all settled in safe places and provisioned for winter.



*Snowberry enjoys apple
at Ducky's pond*