

A New Year for Beavers

On Tuesday evening, January 1, I set off on skis to bring New Year's tidings to my friends, Dew and Charley, at a remote pond. Those of you at lower elevations may be surprised to learn that there is still enough snow for skiing in Marlboro. The storm that delivered this bounty dropped the densest snowfall I can remember, ripping down branches, trees and powerlines. As I clambered through downed treetops in the topsy-turvy forest, I found myself visited by gloomy visions of future weird storms and the warm wet winters climate change will bring.

Fallen trees were not the only obstacles. Halfway there a new stream blocked my usual route to the pond. When the beavers relocated during the summer, their new dam shifted the stream into this new, more easterly drainage basin. This obstruction provoked no gloomy thoughts. I had just finished reading Ben Goldfarb's book, *Eager: the Surprising Secret Life of Beavers and Why they Matter*, so I applauded the beavers' contribution to the complexity of the stream system. In *Eager*, Ben writes vividly of the influence of beavers on the precolonial North American landscape. He describes a land of spongy, messy, complex waterways teeming with fish and wildlife. Because beavers were trapped out before European settlers began domesticating the wilderness, most landscape histories fail to imagine the richness of a beavered continent. I imagined such a primal place as I picked my way along the new flow to the pond.

I brought Ben out to meet Dew and Charley when he was in Vermont interviewing Skip Lisle for the book. Skip is a beaver habitat evangelist and has dedicated his career to developing solutions to beaver/human conflicts. Skip suggested Ben might like to meet my beavers while he was in the area, so the three of us met up one evening and hiked out to the pond. When we arrived, Dew, the matriarch, swam over to enjoy the apples we brought for her. The yearling, Charley, arrived a bit later, making his endearing squeak-whine greetings. We humans admired these two fine rodents and talked of the good works of beavers and the trials they face. We only got a little lost on the way home. I hope Ben's wife forgave him for getting home so late.

On the first day of this new year, the rains and warm weather of the preceding days were blown off by big winds. When I arrived at the pond, temperatures had just dipped below freezing and the stars were as bright as I've ever seen them. I spotted a beaver in the open



water near the lodge, and as I unpacked and found a place to sit, Dew clambered up onto the ice and made her way over. I was busy taking notes when I heard the squeaky arrival of Charley. He was skittish. He climbed up on the ice, took a few steps toward me, and then hustled back to the pond. He swam back and forth beneath my seat and then climbed up on the ice again. As he got up his courage to get an apple, something startled him, and he and Dew spun, dove into the pond with a tremendous splash, and returned to their lodge.

The snow had frozen hard and my headlamp was dim, so the downhill return through the debris strewn forest was frequently alarming. Oh, for a nice old-fashioned storm of deep powder! In *Eager*, Ben describes the substantial role beavers play in remediating our climate crisis. In one chapter, he showcases the climate tribulations of the West and how beavers are restoring badly degraded streams, holding water on the land and raising water tables. This work is especially valuable as receding glaciers and a reduced snowpack contribute to drought conditions. The ponds cool local temperatures and store carbon too! Yes, beavers dam culverts, flood parking lots, and cut down our ornamental trees. Skip Lisle has shown that we can prevent these conflicts and allow beavers to remain in place to continue to restoring wetlands.

The changes we humans impose on this good planet cause irrevocable damage to its life-generating and -sustaining capacities. The changes beavers make enrich habitat for countless other species and mitigate the damage we cause. Which species has the higher claim to a disputed site? I know who I'd vote for. If you read *Eager*, I think you'll agree. —Patti Smith