

## Reducks



I will never forget the evening of Ducky's formal debut, an event that took place during my first summer of beaver watching. I had waited for weeks to see the kits, but they never appeared when I was there. That evening, Willow, the matriarch, arrived to sample the picnic I brought for her, as had become her habit. Instead of finishing her refreshment, however, she ate just a little and then swam away. She soon returned with a miniature beaver bobbing beside her. Willow strolled back up to her picnic while Ducky sat up in the shallow water, little paws tucked up to her chest and watched. Her wonder could not have equaled mine. I like to think that Willow had decided it was time to show off her baby. At the very least, allowing the kit to follow her to the picnic site demonstrated the degree of trust she felt in me.

As that summer became winter, little Ducky taught me the ways of young beavers. Though she sometimes pretended to be helpful, she enjoyed a childhood of leisure. She would raid the larder while the rest of the family worked to gather it. As November drew to a close, Ducky bestowed upon me a high honor—a little squeak-whine greeting as I stood alone on the shore one night. I had become an honorary beaver.

The next summer, still just a small beaver herself, Ducky spent long hours in the lodge supervising her new siblings. By mid-July, Ducky was shepherding two new kits around the pond. She had become a full-fledged working member of the family.

Another blew winter in and then trickled away. According to the literature, Ducky, now two, was ready to leave her natal clan and forge her own way. This is the phase of life when adult beavers are most vulnerable. I could imagine too well the dangers a lone beaver might encounter on a quest for a territory and mate. True to form, once the new kits were born, Ducky headed off into the wide world.

I guessed that she would follow the brook and its tributaries rather than head off cross country, though I had once seen a beaver dead in a road far from any stream, so I couldn't be sure. Would she select a site and create a new pond, or would she be more motivated to find a mate? A mate would be more difficult to come by. I knew of no other colonies in this watershed that would have dispersing two-year-olds.

I searched for Ducky upstream and down. I found a single beaver settled in a magnificent alder swamp at the bottom of the brook but it wasn't Ducky. Only one tributary remained to check. If Ducky was not there, it meant she had leap-frogged the alder swamp pond and entered the big river. With a road following the river for most of its length, and a branching network of tributaries, Ducky would be much more difficult to find, and much more exposed to the hazards that arise from proximity to humans.

On July 11, I set out up the remaining tributary. I knew that beavers had once occupied a site about three-quarters of a mile up, and a pretty little pond had persisted long enough to appear as a landmark on a couple of generations of maps. Once there I found fresh mud along the top of the dam and sprigs of blueberry in the water nearby. I clambered noisily up a bank at the end of the dam. As I did, I heard a beaver surge through the water and slap its tail. I sat down near a derelict lodge the beaver had just vacated. On the far side of the pond a beaver floated nervously out from behind a bleached snag. Ducky? The beaver began to paddle slowly toward me. I tossed an apple into the water. The beaver paddled faster. Ducky!

The habitat she had chosen was good, but not excellent. Like most beaver ponds at this elevation, largely inedible red maple, spruce, and fir ringed the water. There were some pond lilies, however, and their roots would provide winter sustenance.

Ducky lived in the pond alone and I wondered how that would affect a social animal. I imagined her life there to be a bit gloomy. I was not entirely surprised when she disappeared again a month later. I renewed my search. I visited the pond at the bottom of the stream. The same beaver remained the solitary occupant. Nor was Ducky in residence elsewhere on her tributary. My next step was to follow the length of the brook from my house up to her childhood territory.

As I approached an old dam, I saw that water had collected behind it again. Sure enough, a beaver's wake sliced across the dark pool as I approached. Ducky swam right up for her apples. This site did have an abundance of winter forage, and though just a fifteen-minute stroll from my house, it was still remote from other humans. Beaver trails, canals, and a harvest of alder branches suggested Ducky was not just passing through. As I gazed upstream, admiring the pretty valley, I saw the second beaver. He swam right over. Ducky, busy with an apple, greeted him with a few little squeak-whines. The new beaver emitted a low growl-like hum, then a warning huff, and for good measure, slapped with his tail. When he surfaced, I explained that I'd known Ducky since she was in pigtails, so he'd better get used to my visits. He huffed again and swam off.

Despite this cool reception, I was delighted to meet Ducky's mate. In the fairy tales this is where the story would end, and perhaps in the relatively uncomplicated world of a beaver, I could conclude with "and they all lived happily ever after." I prefer to think of this as the beginning of a story. You bet, I'll keep you posted.



Ducky and Growler at their new pond