What do you know?

After spending all of my free evenings for the past few years sitting around by beaver ponds, I might be excused for assuming some level of expertise where large, flat-tailed rodents are concerned, but only in some circles. In scientific circles I could only claim knowledge if I had statistically significant data to support my hypotheses. I apologize to you, readers, for recklessly placing you in the first circle. Yes, based simply on my observations of one beaver family, I made the assertion in my last column that beavers "have not honed the skills that help other animals locate food." I based this assumption on the observation that the six beavers I had been watching shared the same poor aptitude for finding the snacks I brought them. They seem to ignore all visual cues, and would instead slowly zig-zag their way toward, say, a floating apple, using their sense of smell. I often had to toss a second apple when they failed to find one nearby in plain sight. It is possible that my claim is true, but if so, at least one beaver refuses to conform.

I met this beaver a few weeks ago while exploring the watershed in search of two-year-old Ducky. Ducky had set off into the Big World on her own when her mother gave birth to this year's kits, and I hoped to learn how far she would travel and what conditions would encourage her to settle down. When I found a brand new dam in a beautiful wetland complex about three miles downstream from Ducky's former home, I thought I had found her. This was beaver heaven—acres of alders and sedge meadows in a wide valley. I was confident that Ducky would not only remember me, but would be happy to see me. She had always enjoyed the apples I brought, and used to take them from my hand and sit near me to eat.

I settled in to wait for her on an old section of dam across from what appeared to be the lodge. Beautiful green fireflies flickered among the alders, a white-throated sparrow sang its haunting lament, green frogs and gray tree frogs called, and at last a beaver appeared from around a bend. With the air around me redolent of apple slices, I called to the approaching beaver. This beaver, however, slapped his tail and disappeared into the lodge. I left apple slices bobbing along the dam and headed home.

A friend and I have made several trips to visit this beaver since, and I have seen enough to be quite certain he is not Ducky. Not only is Mike wary of us, but his nose is too big. He does share Ducky's love for apples. Here's the strange thing; Mike will swim across the pond straight toward a floating apple, grab it, and carry it off, no correction of course necessary. Is Mike an exceptional beaver, or are all of the beavers of Lake Dismal handicapped in some way?

My modified hypothesis is now "most beavers have difficulty pinpointing the location of small delicacies, even aromatic ones." I have not yet developed a study to test this hypothesis, but before I discovered Mike, I had begun watching a couple of new beavers in my neighborhood to broaden my sample size. One of these I have named Albert. Like Mike and Ducky, he enjoys apples. When he comes over to my seat on the shore, which he does quite readily now, he ignores the apples, and with his nose just a few inches from the bank he stares at me. Beavers have a limited range of facial expressions. They don't smile or snarl or pin back their ears. When I say that Albert's expression was inscrutable I'm not saying much. He is the only beaver I have given a last name. Though his stare is as likely to be vacuous as thoughtful, it pleases me to imagine that Einstein is pondering weighty matters. Eventually his trance will be broken and he will poke about for an apple. His aptitude for locating them seems to be more like the Lake Dismal beavers' than Mike's.

As Albert and I studied each other last night, I heard the rapid, bouncing approach of another creature in search of food. Soon the sound stopped, and I saw the first jumping mouse of the evening busily shelling the sunflower seeds I had placed a couple of feet from where I sat. Woodland jumping mice are beautiful little creatures. Their chestnut coats are embellished with a bold darker band that runs down their backs. Their tails are unbelievably long and tipped with white.

More bouncing treads could be heard in the distance, and while the course they took was seldom straight, they always ended up right next to a pile of sunflower seeds. The approach of the mice is amusing, and I am still working on theories to explain it. They arrive in what I believe is their evasion mode—high, erratic bounces designed to foil a predator. In this mode, the mouse itself seems unable to determine the direction of the next leap. They often bounce against me as they hop in for a meal, and one mouse ended up in the pond several times last night. I wasn't surprised, therefore, when a little mouse landed

next to my seat. I was surprised, however, when its next little deliberate hop carried it directly into the plastic bag of seeds beside me. It settled down inside the bag, not bothered in the least by the giant illuminated creature watching it. Do I dare say that jumping mice are remarkably adept at locating food? Perhaps they are simply attracted to light, and I shine my flashlight where I expect them to show up. I have learned my lesson and will make no assertions, but you may be sure I will share further observations in this space next month.