



## Farewell Willow

On the night of December 3, I broke a trail through the deep fresh snow to the shores of Sodom Pond. It was not the tough, uphill work that made me immune to the beauty of the moonlit forest; I was going to say good-bye to my old friend Willow.

Some of you met Willow when I began writing about her in this column nearly twelve years ago. If so, you will know that she was the first volunteer when I decided I would like to meet a beaver. She has been sharing her life with me (and you?) ever since. This fall found her settled in a new pond with Henry, mate number five, and Gentian, their 18-month-old kit.

Willow's life was remarkable on two counts. As a beaver ambassador, she welcomed many visitors over the years. In this capacity, she played a small role in awakening humanity to the tremendous role beavers play in making habitat and in holding cooling water on a heating planet.

Willow also had an unusually long life. I have speculated about the superpowers that kept her alive while so many other beavers disappeared. She has been blind in one eye for the past five years and has had the disheveled, bony appearance of advanced age for nearly as long. I suspect she was close to the maximum age for a beaver. The record for a beaver in captivity is 23 years. Beavers in the wild seldom attain half that age.

This year, the signs of age were more pronounced. Willow sometimes choked on her food, and she moved painfully down steep hills. When Henry and Gentian put on fat in the fall, she remained skinny. I began to suspect that she had worn her molars down so far that she had a hard time chewing. Death seemed to hover close. I hoped that she would die peacefully of natural causes. Because her superpowers must be waning with age, her chances of being killed by a predator were increasing. However she died, I hoped I would find her remains, both for the closure that is only possible with such proof and because her teeth would allow me to determine her age.

In late November, after the first snow of the year, I heard a beaver's tail slap warning when I arrived at the pond. Henry made a brief, nervous appearance but swam away again. Willow did not show up. I tried not to worry, but Henry's anxiety was contagious.

The next night, I headed to the pond again hopeful that I would find the wayward beaver and prepared to search if I did not. Only Henry came when I called. I wandered downstream to previous ponds and back on the far side of the brook. I found no recent sign of Willow, but many reminders of the hours spent on those shores. When I arrived at the far side of their home pond, I could see young Gentian out on the ice processing a

tree they had felled. From that vantage, I also saw the tracks of a bear. The bear had walked across the slushy surface of the pond the previous night and pawed at the roof of one of the beavers' temporary lodges.

I spent the next hour following beaver trails. I followed one set of tracks so far that I began to fear Willow had just wandered off cross country, as old creatures are rumored to do when they hear death call. At last, the trail turned back toward home. I did not see the tracks I dreaded, those of carnivores at a kill site. Still, I had been at the pond for hours. Willow would have made an appearance if she'd been able to.

The next morning I set myself the grim task of determining her fate. If I could not find evidence of a predator attack, I would assume that Willow had achieved the near-impossible—dying of old-age in nature. Frost crystals gleamed on the sedges by the pond, and a light skim of ice crystallized into snowflake patterns over the open water. I followed the beavers' trails up the hillside again. I saw no evidence of predation. I returned to the place where the bear tracks left the scene. The tracks continued up the hill, went over a stone wall and up stone steps to a cellar hole. Bear feet left impressions along the edge of the foundation. At a corner, it looked like the bear paused to goof around with a branch since the tracks went back and forth, and a groove appeared beside them. As the tracks continued into the woods, the groove went with them. The bear was dragging something. I knew what I would find.

The pile of sawdust under a skim of ice looked like bedding from a squirrel's nest at first. When it registered as Willow's last meal, I dropped to my knees and howled my sorrow to the still forest. The depth of grief is a measure of love, so I welcome it. I loved that old beaver.

Nearby, I found the bare earth where the feasting occurred. There was a joyful convergence of tracks as scavengers arrived to clean up. Coyote and fisher and fox tracks mingled with the bear's. Every bit of the old beaver had disappeared. As I studied the trampled earth, I noticed a couple of bone fragments. There, where beaver became bear, were Willow's lower jaws with their worn-shiny molars. The wild things had left me my share.

A week later, I made my sad return trek to the pond. The section of ice near the entrance to the lodge was slushy, and I made an opening with my ski pole. I called Henry and waited for many anxious minutes before I heard the gurgles that announced his approach. He rose to the surface wearing a cap of ice and then lumbered up the sloughing snowbank to beach himself, in magnificent portliness, for a treat. In his company by the moonlit pond, I found my farewells had already been said. The night demanded I pay attention to what was there, not what was missing. I could feel Willow's presence in Gentian, snoozing in the lodge nearby. Will she share her mother's remarkable traits? If she does, she will live a long life—and she will share it with us.



Henry in December