

## The River of Life



During the last week of December, I skied down to look for the beaver that recently moved into the brook below my house. Beavers do not relocate in December unless calamity strikes. I suspected that a raging torrent from rain and snowmelt had destroyed this beaver's dam and washed its food cache downstream. While this new location offers good foraging, the rocky stream bottom provides little mud for sealing a dam. Without a deep pond, ice can seal the entrance to a beaver's lodge, trapping the beaver inside.

I had tried hollering on several occasions to entice this beaver to appear. Since that technique hadn't worked, I decided that on this visit I would use the stealth approach—sitting quietly and waiting for the beaver to reveal itself. Once I settled myself by the brook, I noticed that the beaver had been building a lodge directly across from my seat. After a few minutes, I heard the gurgle that announced the emergence of the occupant. The beaver that surfaced paddled quickly over and swam back and forth a few times before lunging up the icy bank and onto the snow beside me. I was so pleased to see the notch in the tail that identified this beaver as Dew.

I first met Dew eight or nine years ago. The uncertainty stems from not knowing if she is Dewberry, born in 2010, or Sundew, born the following year. Either way, I met her shortly after she was born to that champion of beaver survivors, Willow. "Survivor" might seem a strange thing to call a beaver who was just eaten by a bear, but she lived to near the maximum lifespan for a beaver (about 20 years). I have not yet determined her exact age, but the teeth I recovered will allow me to.

Dew is the only one of her offspring known to survive, aside from the yearling Gentian. I concluded last month's column with the hope that Gentian would inherit her mother's penchant for longevity. Given that I could not find any of her siblings, I didn't hold out a great deal of hope. Yet here was Dew — approaching her ninth or tenth year! Dew, who seems to have survived her first mate, Ilex, and is now wintering alone in this unlikely location. Given her heritage, I give her much higher odds of surviving this challenging winter than other beavers. I have seen her mother survive as bad.

On New Year's Eve, I took a few friends out to visit her. Along the way, a dark shape was spotted hustling away into the shadows. When I hailed

the beast, it stopped, then turned and came toward us. There was Quirinus, one of the porcupines I have been studying. He paused on his travels to eat an apple with us.

The forest, glazed in a mix of ice and snow, shone bright in moonlight. Once we settled by the brook, Dew arrived and began opening up channels in the slushy ice. She took an apple and swam to her lodge to eat it before reappearing and clambering up on the opposite bank. There she spent fifteen minutes in elaborate ablutions, scrubbing and combing every bit of her corpulent physique. One of my friends had a blazing headlamp that lit up the scene like stage lights. Dew seemed to be preening for her audience. Why not? Beavers are social animals, and she had been on her own for at least several weeks.

When Dew finally swam off, we headed upstream a bit and built a fire. There in the snowy forest, we enjoyed the rising sparks, and a very localized rain shower caused by the melting ice on branch overhead. I couldn't imagine a more beautiful transition from one year to the next. I was warmed by the fire and by knowing that a new beaver ambassador would carry on the work of my old friend Willow. May the new year bring such joy to you.

