

## Wild Times



WHILE I have been enjoying the slowdown in human activity—fewer cars on the road, fewer planes in the sky—things in my backyard have been anything but quiet. On the last Saturday in April, I hiked up to visit Henry and Gentian, the former mate and the two-year-old offspring of the venerable Willow. The two beavers had survived the winter and had evaded the bear that killed Willow. When I arrived that evening, however, I found the two apples I had left on my last visit. I saw no sign of recent activity. Henry and Gentian were gone. Perhaps a matchmaker had whispered in Henry's ear? Willow's daughter Dew lived downstream and was also single.

Dew last featured in this column in January when I discovered new pond construction in the brook just below my house. Starting a new pond from scratch in winter is an act of desperation. In winter, beavers are supposed to be cozy in a mud-plastered lodge with a well-stocked larder. I would have been more worried if an ordinary beaver had undertaken such an endeavor. However, Dew had created this pond—Dew, the daughter of Willow, and a veteran of eight winters.

It was dark by the time I reached Dew's pond that night. She swam over and climbed ashore, making the long, low, huffing sounds that indicate agitation or warning. I left her an apple and headed down to the dam, hoping to find Henry and Gentian. Sure enough, along the way, a beaver torpedoed out of a hole in the bank—a small beaver that zipped along the stream bottom. Gentian?

The dam had been worked on over the preceding week. I scanned the surface of the pond for beavers and saw the small beaver hiding in some alders. My headlamp beam picked up something else in the woods beyond—the reflected shine of widely-spaced eyes—a bear.

Once upon a time, I believed that bears were not much of a threat to adult beavers. Indeed, according to the literature, bear predation on adult beavers is quite unusual. Black bear diets are made up almost entirely of plants, with insects for dessert. Still, the footprints in the snow last December left little doubt about the fate of Willow. Furthermore, when I rediscovered Dew's son Charley living upstream this spring, he had some scars that seemed most likely the result of bear claws. Given this evidence, I suspected this bear was after more than the sedges sprouting along the pond shore. I yelled and clapped to scare it away, but from the far shore, I was deemed non-threatening.

I returned to Dew's pond the next morning. The bear had bashed in the roof of Dew's lodge and clawed away some of the mud and sticks. Still, the sturdy latticework of larger branches prevented access to the living chamber.

When I returned that evening, I discovered the more significant havoc. When Dew came ashore for an apple, I could see a deep slash across her wrist and a couple of smaller scratches on her face. Wounds oozed through the dense fur on her shoulders.

As I write this column, I am sitting on the shore of the pond in the warm sunshine four days later. For the last few days, I have spent a lot of time here persuading Dew to eat antibiotic-laced apples. Today, a kingfisher wings overhead. Chickadees sing in the alders. The little beaver has climbed the opposite bank and is eating some spruce twigs. When Dew finally deigns to rise from her diurnal slumbers, she swims over and limps ashore on three legs. A ribbon of dead tissue dangles from her shoulder, and her front paw has doubled in size. Still, she is using it more than she was yesterday. She eats her apple then sits up to scratch her belly. The little beaver dips into the pond, swims over, and climbs up behind Dew, providing my first close look at this elusive fellow. This cutie must be a yearling that Dew has had stashed away here all winter.

I'll be spending a lot of time at Dew's pond over the next couple of weeks, making sure she takes her medicine. I hope like heck that it works. With so much of humanity fretting over the health of friends and families now, I know I'll be in good company. I'll bring my work and my binoculars. Beaver ponds are always busy with life, and most of it is peaceful. They are fascinating places to fret.

If Dew pulls through this, she is likely to be a wiser beaver and may have a better chance of avoiding this aberrant bear. Once I no longer need to worry about Dew, I'll start looking for Henry and Gentian. I hope they've found a place of abundance and security for their next home. I expect I'll spend some time sitting on their shores. May we all have less to fret about then.

