



The View From Heifer Hill—July 2020

## Life in the Beaver Lodge

Finally, it's a rainy day. I am nice and dry and cozy hanging out in the Beaver Lodge with my fellow members. While I type on my computing machine, the other three keep up a steady conversation and engage in some of the club's most popular activities. Old Chub and Curly are sumo wrestling. Pumpkin is taking full advantage of the buffet. Because I am the member of longest standing, although only an honorary one, these new recruits look to me for guidance. I'm afraid I have not done very well. Among my greatest failings? I can't entice them to use a premium amenity, the club pool.

This is among the first days in the past six weeks when I have felt able to relax and enjoy the company of these delightful little beasts. It has been a tough journey for all of us. These three became wards of the State when their unfortunate mother was killed by a car. Two of the kits were apprehended the next day as they were about to attempt a crossing of Route 30. I found the third huddled downstream, having crossed beneath the highway in a culvert.

I had some idea what I was getting into when I got the call. Beavers spend at least a full two years with their parents and siblings before they are ready for independence. Furthermore, they spend most of their time in the water. How does one keep beavers safe and happy and practicing beaver skills for that long? I'm still not sure what all of the answers are, but I'm optimistic that I'll figure it out.

Like most mammal rehabilitators, I have a selection of milk replacement formulas available for incoming orphans. Hungry babies are usually eager enough to be fed that they readily learn to accept substitutes. These three little kits stuck out their tongues in disgust and would have none of it. In desperation, I found a trick that worked. If I filled the syringe with formula, and then sucked up a little apple juice concentrate. The sweetness primed the pump and they would suck the formula down eagerly. This worked well for a day or two. Then they lost their appetites and developed diarrhea. I called all the beaver people and wildlife vets I could find for advice. I will spare you the gory details, but suffice it to say that a week into this project, the three little beavers were cadaverously thin.

I was convinced that I would spend the next few days watching them die. Instead, a new medication was tried along with some new supplements and slowly their appetites returned. In the ensuing weeks there have been improvements and set-backs. When a fecal test ruled out parasites and pathogens, their wonderful vet, Dr Svec, suggested they were suffering from "dysbiosis." The friendly flora and fauna they needed for digestion had been overwhelmed by fiendish ones. The first thing I decided to do was eliminate whatever might be feeding the rogue abdominal biota. No more sugar. Instead I tried a probiotic used in animals with similar digestive systems and some poop soup. Gross, I know, but desperate times . . . .

My nearest beaver poop donor was Gentian, Willow's son, who has been busy making a pond in the brook just below my house. By the time beavers have finished processing food, it is a fairly inoffensive blob of plant fibers and, I hoped, enough friendly bacteria to inoculate the three kits. I explained to the kits, as I squirted a little slurry down each throat, that this poop came from a line of heroic beavers, and if anything could cure them, this poop would.

Without added apple juice, the beavers lost all interest in milk, but have taken a very keen interest in the other things beavers eat. They have been devouring aspen leaves and bark, basswood leaves, and they love the rodent nuggets that I have offered as treats to my wild beaver friends. They are growing in size and personality.

As I wrap up this column, Old Chub, always first in line at meal times, thunders around the lodge at a gallop. He pushes mountains

of shavings around sculpting his landscape. After this brief bout of vigor he flops on his side for a nap. Curly, the last to rouse herself for activity, lies down next to him and grooms him with her teeth.

Pumpkin, the smallest kit, has grabbed the leg of my pants in his teeth and, nose down, is attempting to barrel off with it for some important beaver purpose. Frustrated, he squeaks and shakes his head and then stands up and squeaks at me beseechingly. I rub his fur and offer encouragement. He smacks at my hands, squeaks some more, and finally waddles off for another helping of lunch.

By the time I write about these little beavers again, I hope to report that they have become masters of aquatic environments. The Lodge really should hire a swim instructor, but with dues what they are that doesn't seem likely. I'll do what I can.

