



The View From Heifer Hill, January 2021

Fortunately

Do you remember the classic children's book, "What Good Luck! What Bad Luck!" by Remy Charlip? In the story, the fortunes of the protagonist, Ned, ricochet so rapidly it's a wonder the lad emerged at the story's end without whiplash. That is a bit how I am feeling after binging on the news during 2020.

A dear friend of mine paid absolutely no attention to current events but could, nevertheless, write a version of "What Good Luck! What Bad Luck!" for a new generation. Pumpkin's story would start with the good luck of her birth in a cozy, stone culvert, followed quickly by the bad luck of her mother's death. The three of you who read this column every month will know of the ups and downs of this beaver's first six months. Two of you still have not learned of her most recent misfortune, the death of her sister, Curly, in early November. A necropsy showed that a stray support membrane cut off the blood supply to a section of her intestine. Her death left Pumpkin without the constant companionship that beavers crave.

Now Pumpkin relies on me for company. The chance to spend time with her tops my "What good luck!" column. Young beavers are a riot! Unless she's curled up snoozing in the straw

when I arrive, she rushes to greet me with excited whines. I grab her for hugs, and she keeps up a flow of beaver conversation. She weighs about 25 pounds now but loves to be picked up and bounced.

Her winter home is at the Training Matters facility on Ames Hill (thank you, Sara and Craig!). She has a 6' round stock tank there and spends most of her waking time in the water. Watching this aquatic creature in her element is a delight indeed. In her best move, she rolls, grabs my hand with her paws, and pushes off in an upside-down dive.

I have enjoyed watching the appearance of beaver behaviors. Pumpkin is becoming an expert stick handler and is now eating much the same diet as her wild brethren, the small twigs and inner bark of a selection of saplings. She commandeers anything that appears in her enclosure and uses it for construction projects. When I finally dismantle her pen, I expect to find my missing gloves and glasses.

One of the things I have learned is that beavers are homebodies. The kits have been less interested in exploring than other young mammals at

similar developmental stages. When I first moved them to their new winter quarters, Pumpkin and Curly spent the first two days in their tank hiding beneath the ramp. Beavers are most secure in their watery home, and young beavers that venture far from the lodge and water are easy pickings for any predator. Over the past few weeks, however, I have been encouraging Pumpkin to explore. Last week, I opened the outside door to see what she would think of snow. Here is what ensued: For several minutes, Pumpkin sat in the doorway and gathered information. Then she reached down and stuck her nose in the strange fluffy water. That was enough. She turned and trundled toward her enclosure. Or was it enough? No. Back she came, and this time she stepped

down into the snow. What marvelous stuff! She soon discovered that she could both swim through it and use it to build things. She could even dig in it (see the video at www.beec.org)! What good luck! A few days later, all of the snow melted. What bad luck.

Elsewhere in Vermont, another orphaned beaver kit needs a companion. What good luck! Beavers are extremely territorial, and introducing the kits will take finesse. What bad luck? I'll keep you posted. In the meantime, I count myself fortunate to have weathered 2020 with a personal balance sheet weighted toward good luck, and hey, no whiplash.

