



The View From Heifer Hill, February 2021

Matchmaker, Matchmaker

The few matchmaking initiatives I have been involved with in the past have been busts, so I'm not sure why I expected a different outcome for Pumpkin and BK. They were, even in beaver years, children—too young for an arranged marriage. Still, when Pumpkin's sister died, and I knew that a young male beaver was pining for a companion, I decided to risk it once again. On January 3, we loaded the child bride in her straw-filled crate into the car and drove her to Roxbury.

I include beavers in a small group of wild mammals that are quick to bestow trust. The other two are skunks and porcupines. In each case, they have an excellent security system. Skunks and porcupines, of course, carry their defenses with them. In the case of beavers, they create their own fortress. In the water they are nearly invincible. While young porcupines I have raised have been quite adventurous, Pumpkin and her sister were the opposite, seldom venturing more than 15 feet from the security of their kiddy pool. Beavers are homebodies.

Pumpkin drooled nervously on the whole drive. When we arrived in Roxbury, I released her into an aviary where BK awaited her in a smaller fenced area. I have to say, I thought him very handsome.

He had big brown eyes and lustrous fur. Did I mention he was marvelously chubby? What's not to love? Pumpkin paid him almost no mind, busying herself with trying to find an exit and the quickest route home. BK charged the fence and huffed at her when she came too close. We spent an hour in that outdoor area. I got to know BK's "parents" while the affianced ignored each other. The two young beavers would be kept in adjacent enclosures for two to three weeks, or until they seemed to take an affectionate interest in each other.

Suitable beaver habitat is limited to low-gradient brooks or to ponds and rivers that are deep enough that beavers will be able to swim under the ice all winter. Those lucky enough to establish a territory must be prepared to defend it to the death against interlopers. Would two young beavers from different families, one male and one female, bond with each other while they were still too young to be interested in romance, or would they regard each other as enemies? I had been warned by experienced beaver rehabbers that such introductions must be made very carefully. I returned home, bereft but hopeful. I liked to imagine Pumpkin adjusting to her new surroundings and beginning to take an interest in BK. Best

of all, I liked to think of her well-situated for the future, for her beau came with some excellent beaver habitat awaiting occupants. Two weeks later, I received a photo of the two beavers sleeping next to each other on opposite sides of the fence, an encouraging development. A couple of days after that, the gate between their pens was opened. As John and Laura stood by, prepared to intervene, the two beavers began vibrating and then launched into battle. The humans quickly (and courageously) leapt into the fray and separated them. John called me with the news, "I think your beaver is a male."

The most reliable way to tell the sex of a beaver is an X-ray. If the beaver is male, he will have a small bone that females lack, the os penis. Surprisingly, there aren't many vets that are experienced in sexing beavers, but I found one who was willing to give it a shot. Dr. Warner had come out to X-ray Pumpkin before the matchmaking took place. We had scanned the images, all those foot and leg and hip and back bones, looking for a skinny little floating bone. No os penis was seen. While seeing the bone provides a clear answer, not seeing it might mean you're just not seeing it, Dr. Warner explained. It was the best we could do at the time.

After the battle, I was still hopeful that Pumpkin and BK were just the wrong age to get along. Maybe in another year, when they when they old

enough to be looking for a mate, they could be reunited. To see if this might be possible, I asked John if he could arrange to have his vet X-ray Pumpkin before I brought her home. The date was set for several days later.

I was excited to see Pumpkin again as I drove the two hours north in the frigid dawn. Laura toted her from her warm enclosure out to the aviary where the X-ray would take place. Pumpkin was so stressed that she just whined a brief hello before hustling off to dig her way to water. Temperatures were still in the low single digits when the vet arrived. This time the X-ray was taken from a different angle. I donned a lead apron and held Pumpkin on my lap with her belly exposed. No mistaking it. There was the little bone. Pumpkin and BK were not to be.

It has taken Pumpkin a few weeks to feel fully at home again. Today he is just full of the sillies. Did you know that beavers can hop around with all four feet in the air? They can. Not very high, mind. Of course, like the big beaver he is becoming, he has a lot of work to do, too. I need to keep him supplied with building materials for his dam projects. As for matchmaking, I'll bet you're all thinking I've finally learned my lesson. Maybe. Maybe not. I'm guessing around this time next year I'll be downloading Tinder for Beavers and flipping through the profiles.

