



The View From Heifer Hill—April 2022

## The Perfect Place to be a Beaver

PUMPKIN has always had important things to do. Beavers' lives depend upon creating and maintaining the watery world that keeps them safe. Because he is an orphan, however, his work has been stymied by fences and substrates. How does one deepen a metal tank? How can one harvest building materials on the other side of a fence?

In May, Pumpkin will turn two, the age at which beavers are ready for independence. He is well-positioned for success; not only is he large and well-nourished, he already has a mate. Pye, badly injured as a yearling, joined Pumpkin in the beaver orphanage last summer. He adores her. She thinks he will do. Just so you know, despite all of the talk about Pumpkin, Pye is the heroine of this particular tale.

I have had two years to find a release site for the beavers. A good one would be well away from humans and their infrastructure or

in an existing pond where they would be welcomed. It would be at least half a stream-mile from other beavers (they are very territorial). The perfect pond would have abundant beaver food growing in or near the water. This would reduce time spent ashore where they are vulnerable to predators. None of the sites I knew of qualified.

One thaw day in early March, Pumpkin took matters into his own paws. He dug his way under the fence that surrounded his winter pond. He didn't want to run away, he just wanted to get to the other side. A sled load of rocks provided a temporary foil, but now that Pumpkin had found the key to freedom. . . .

I sat on the shore as Pumpkin swam back and forth and I considered my options. Adding an additional level of security would be very expensive and time-consuming. What's more, the channel Pumpkin made for himself also provided an escape route for water, and





the water didn't care about rocks. I needed to find the beavers a release site right away.

I had already considered and eliminated all of the places I knew well. I spent some time on Google Earth looking for ideal wetlands in a larger geographic area. Unfortunately, Google Earth doesn't tell you where beavers are living right now. Chances are that any site that looked like great beaver habitat would already have resident beavers, or there would be a reason it didn't. The release site I decided upon was far from perfect. There was little food next to the pond, and there were predator tracks in abundance. On the plus side, if I released the beavers there I could set up camp and stay there at night, for a while at least, to keep the predators away.

Here was the plan: I would lure the beavers into pet crates and load them onto utility sleds. I had a team on standby to haul them through the woods to the pond. For two weeks, however, Pye evaded capture. Meanwhile, the snow and my expedition crew began to evaporate. On March 20, I was down to a crew of one—Will, who stays very fit so he can jump out of airplanes to fight fires. He would be leaving for California in the morning but was ready for action on one last night.

After waiting an hour with no sign of Pye, I began to worry. A few days earlier, the beavers

had resumed digging and had created two new holes under the fence. These had been patched with rocks and wire. Could Pye have been fenced out? At 8 PM, I decided it was time to look for her elsewhere. I knew there was another little pond downstream. If she did get out and avoided predators, I would likely find her there.

The ice-covered pond was surrounded by a thicket of willow, winterberry holly and high-bush blueberry growing in a moat of open water. As I worked my way around it in the dark, I came out on a little grassy peninsula with a few big conifers and a view of a dazzling night sky. I noticed a little freshly disturbed earth. Was that done by a beaver? Then I saw the ripples in the water and heard Pye's greeting—a deep, low hum. Pye, who has remained wary since she arrived, was glad to see me.

I had known of this pond but hadn't considered it as a permanent release site because it is too small for long-term residency, and downstream the beavers would encounter conflict zones where they might be shot or trapped. Still, as a temporary situation, it was perfect. Yes, there were coyotes in the neighborhood, but with a border of beaver edibles growing in the water at the pond edge, they would have no need to roam beyond the water. What's more, previous beaver occupants





had left behind a burrow in the bank as a starter home.

It was almost 9 PM when I knocked on the door of the pond's owner. I could tell you lots of wonderful things about George, but for the sake of brevity, I will just tell you that he agreed to offer the beavers temporary sanctuary in his little bit of paradise. Now, how to get Pumpkin there? I could wrestle him into a crate. Will and I could lug it up to my car, and I could drive him most of the way to George's pond. Or, I could release Pumpkin from the enclosure and hope he headed down the flowage to the pond on his own. I would supervise, of course. I decided on the latter.

Back at Pumpkin's pond, I moved some rocks and he swam up under the fence. Although Beavers do not communicate with facial expressions, when he emerged on the freedom side, his whole body conveyed the awareness of a momentous change. But was this a good thing?

When I stood and began moving toward the woods and George's pond, Pumpkin glued himself to my heels. By the time we were halfway there, I relaxed and enjoyed the singular

experience of going for a walk in the night forest with a beaver. Pumpkin's tail dragged in the leaf litter as he hustled to keep up. When we arrived at the pond, he followed me up a wooden ramp and across the ice. When we came to the water he plunged in, and I retreated to work my way along the shore. Exuberant squeaks of greeting directed me to the beaver pair. Under a thicket of holly, Pumpkin climbed all over Pye like an excited puppy.

Stars glittered in the deep black of a moonless night. A saw-whet owl tooted in the distance. Two beavers toured the pond making scent mounds, the sweet complex fragrance announcing to all that this was their home. In this confluence of wonders, the trials of raising beaver kits became trivial. I thought with gratitude of all who had helped along the way. I wished they could have been there to share that jubilant experience. It takes a village to raise a beaver. Pumpkin swam up and squeaked to me, and then set out to do the things a beaver needs to do.

*See some video of Pumpkin and Pye on their first night at the new pond [here](#).*

