



The View From Heifer Hill—June 2022

Beavers in Springtime

Spring is melting into summer on the shores of George's Pond. Regular readers, are you picturing two beavers, Pumpkin and Pye, embarking on life as a young couple? They made their way to this pretty little pond in late March after prolonged captivity. Pumpkin had been in custody since he was orphaned as a tiny kit; Pye joined him last summer, a badly injured yearling. Right around now, the two beavers would be celebrating their second birthdays if beavers celebrated birthdays. They have every reason to be pleased with their accomplishments so far.

Luckier beavers spend the first two years with their parents and siblings living unfettered beaver lives. They then set off to find a mate and establish a territory. If they succeed in this high-risk endeavor, they might have a family of their own as three-year-olds. Often it takes longer. Pumpkin and Pye have been living as a pair in a fenced pond over

the winter and now had their own territory. Would they have kits this spring?

I visit regularly and in mid-May had the first evidence that the yearling beavers might procreate—Pye had visible nipples. The next evidence came when I arrived a week later and instead of the eager welcome I often get from Pumpkin, he huffed at me menacingly. Did he know that he might soon be a parent and the time had come to banish superfluous family members? Because I am teaching him that, while I may be his mother, I am not a beaver, I ignored his huffiness, and he has gradually reverted to his former ways.

The last weekend in May, Jen Vanderhoof came to visit from Seattle where she leads the King County Beaver Working Group. She is as crazy about beavers as I am. While beavers are important creators of wetlands here in the east, they are essential climate



change mitigation allies in the west. As the west becomes hotter, drier, and more fire-prone, beavers hold water on the land. Their wetlands help raise the water table, create fire breaks, and help make up for the loss of snow meltwater. Many available streams remain uncolonized and Jen is working to make them welcoming to beavers.

Jen and I had three evenings to picnic, photograph the beavers, compare notes, and share stories on the shores of George's Pond. On the first two evenings, Pumpkin and Pye were both out, enjoying a season of leisure. They made a few minor adjustments to their dams and foraged for roots and shoots along the shore. Black-throated-blue warblers and ovenbirds sang from the woods. Yellowthroats hopped through the shrubs.

On Jen's final visit, we wondered why beavers take two years to become independent. What are they learning from their families? What skills might Pumpkin lack? Near our picnic rock, he adjusted the position of a stump on his dam. He looked pretty competent to us.

We were very aware that while we picnicked, Pye had not appeared. When we finish eating, we circled the pond and squelched through calf-deep mud soup to get to the lodge. Inside, we heard Pye's squeak-whines. She was not talking to herself, no. In response, we heard the tiny squeak-whines of newborn beaver kits. The kits would be just a bit smaller than Pumpkin when I met him—the size of potatoes with little flat tails. Although they are already furry, active, and happy to swim, it will be a month before they leave the lodge. Jen and I expressed our jubilation as quietly as we could—popped the cork on an imaginary bottle of bubbly and then squelched our way back out.

The next evening, I returned to document the behavior of the new parents. On this second night of parenthood, Pye was ready for a break and came out for some apples and carrots. The beavers relaxed beside each other on the shore and enjoyed a snack. Pye then swam into the lodge. I could hear her shake to dry her fur and then greet the kits with a low hum that shifted up to a squeak-whine. Little squeakers replied.



I sat underneath a big pine next to the lodge. On the first of June, spring peepers were still singing and green frogs joined the chorus. From the woods, gray tree frogs trilled. A song sparrow sang in the winterberry holly. Pumpkin, grooming nearby, was gripped by a fit of joie de vivre, and charged toward me, then planted his backside on the earth and rose to throw his head back and forth like a fool—a standard frolicking move. Oh, my grown-up beaver. Who knows what unique skills he will bring to this next chapter in his life?

Visit the [Wildlife Rehabilitation](http://www.beec.org) page at www.beec.org to hear a recording of the beaver kits and to see photos and videos from George's Pond.

