



## An Unconventional Beaver

When I became an observer of the beavers in my wild backyard, I already had a list in my brain entitled “Beaver Facts.” Fourteen years into the project, many entries have been scratched out or amended. “Facts” has been replaced with “Observations.”

Among my teachers is Dew. I have known her since she was born eleven years ago. I saw a lot of her for the first four years of her life when she lived with her parents, Willow and Bunchberry. Scratch *“Beaver kits live with their parents for two years and then disperse.”*

When she was five, I found Dew living at a remote pond. I visited her throughout the winter and spring and saw no sign of another beaver. When I returned in September, I found a beaver kit swimming behind her, along with a shy mate I named Ilex. Since Dew had been living alone during the late-winter mating season, I was baffled by the presence of the kit. I later found that Ilex had been maintaining separate quarters at another pond upstream. Sometimes the couple lived together and sometimes they didn’t. They must have gotten together for a “date” in February. So much for *“Beavers live in nuclear family units— a mated pair and their offspring.”*

That fall, Ilex moved in with Dew. The next year they had more kits. I didn’t worry much

when they all disappeared the next spring since these beavers move frequently.

The next chapters of Dew’s story read like a fairy tale. Not the *happily ever after* part; the parts with the monsters and walls of briars and dark knights. I have written about some of these adventures in previous columns. They include, in a nutshell:

*Dew arrived, alone, in mid-December, at a new site below my house.* I do not know what calamity led to such a desperate act. According to the list of Beaver Observations, by December beavers have finished their preparations for a season under the ice and snow. Because Dew is of heroic stock, she succeeded in establishing a homestead and finding food in the heart of winter.

*Dew survived an attack by a bear,* almost certainly the same bear that killed her mother, Willow, the previous fall. Once Dew recovered, she moved in with Henry, Willow’s widower, and since I’m using definitions applied to human families, we’ll call him her step-father.

I now resume the untold chapters. Early the next winter, Henry disappeared, probably vic-



Dew in late May, 2022.

tim of a predator. Dew remained alone through the next year and prepared for winter at a new site. When I skied upstream during a frigid spell in January, I discovered her tracks by a hole in the ice upstream from her lodge and food supply. I couldn't find any openings in the ice that would allow her to return home. Because she is of heroic stock, I assumed she would find a way back.

I returned to search for Dew in late spring. Her half-sibling, Gentian, had spent the winter just below my house. I checked in with her first, and then worked my way upstream looking for signs of beaver activity. At Dew's winter home, I found her intact food cache. As I continued on, I found beaver activity from the past few months, but not the past few days. I arrived at Pople's Pond, a mile from my starting point, and decided it was time to turn back. First, I would walk across the dam to see if there was any sign of life in the little pond just below. In the middle of the dam someone had deposited a fresh armload of mud. "Dew?" I asked, hopefully. Sure enough, a beaver appeared from the

ruins of a lodge and swam toward me. I headed for the shore and a reunion. The beaver who climbed up to join me was the skinniest beaver I have ever seen. I suspect she had, indeed, survived the winter cut off from her food supply.

In the ensuing weeks, she has put some weight back on. We have shared the golden light of many evenings. This week, as she raised herself to eat an apple, I noticed that her belly was exceptionally large and that she had visible nipples. Dew is going to have kits! How is this possible? The only local beaver I know of is Gentian. You know, the half-sibling who lives a mile downstream? I have assumed the two were sisters since even closely related beavers will form a pair bond if there is no other choice. Maybe Gentian is a male and they decided to mate during a spring thaw, but not live together? Could there be another beaver I haven't found who is living in his own lodge upstream? Perhaps the answer is immaculate conception? I'll let you know if a beaver kit with a halo appears. That will be a new one for my list of Beaver Observations.

Restored to health in late June and ready to give birth.

