



The View From Heifer Hill—November 2022

Holy child caught on trail cam

A Strange Beaver Tale

THE MOON shone through the spruce spires, lighting up the pale grasses along the brook. My headlamp further illuminated a tiny beaver kit with a wee paddle tail who had clambered ashore across the brook from me. In the spotlight, he set to, putting his helter-skelter hairdo aright. Regular readers of this column are, no doubt, filled with anticipation—could this be the holy child we have been awaiting? The answer is somewhat more complicated but no less wondrous.

I wrote of the possible existence of this beaver kit in June when I found that his mother, Dew, a beaver who had been living in isolation for a year, was about to give birth. The only other beaver in I had seen in this watershed was Dew's half-sister, Gentian, so the most likely explanation for her pregnancy was, I told myself, immaculate conception.

I was not surprised that Dew would be so chosen. Those of you who have read this column before will not need to be told why Dew is an extraordinary beaver. You will know that she has survived numerous trials, including the wounds inflicted by the bear that killed her mother.

Because I had been busy with other beavers over the summer, I couldn't return to visit Dew and meet her holy child until late September. There was no sign of them in the pond where I had last seen her. No worries. Beavers move often. For a week, I searched along the rest of the brook and then along the tributaries. I found no beavers anywhere, and feared the worst.

With the search for Dew and the miracle kit over, I turned my attention to Gentian. She is a four-year-old beaver who has been living alone for the past two years. She has been busy over the summer building dams along a half-mile stretch of the brook just below my house. I never knew a beaver to occupy so much territory. One evening, as I watched Gentian paddle upstream, I saw a second beaver torpedo away downstream. Gentian had a mate at last.

In mid-October, beaver-loving friends from the west coast, Jen and Pamela, came to visit. I gave them the discouraging news about Dew and her kit, then we set out to inspect Gentian's works. We were all impressed by the amount of activity. I allowed myself a little hope. Maybe Dew was here too, and had been laying low on my previ-

ous surveys of the brook. It would be strange, I knew, for beavers to live so close together, especially with so many vacant ponds in the watershed. Beavers are extremely territorial. Would Dew and Gentian be more social because they are related? They weren't raised together, but I have read that beavers can recognize family members by smell. So strange, yes, but stranger things have happened.

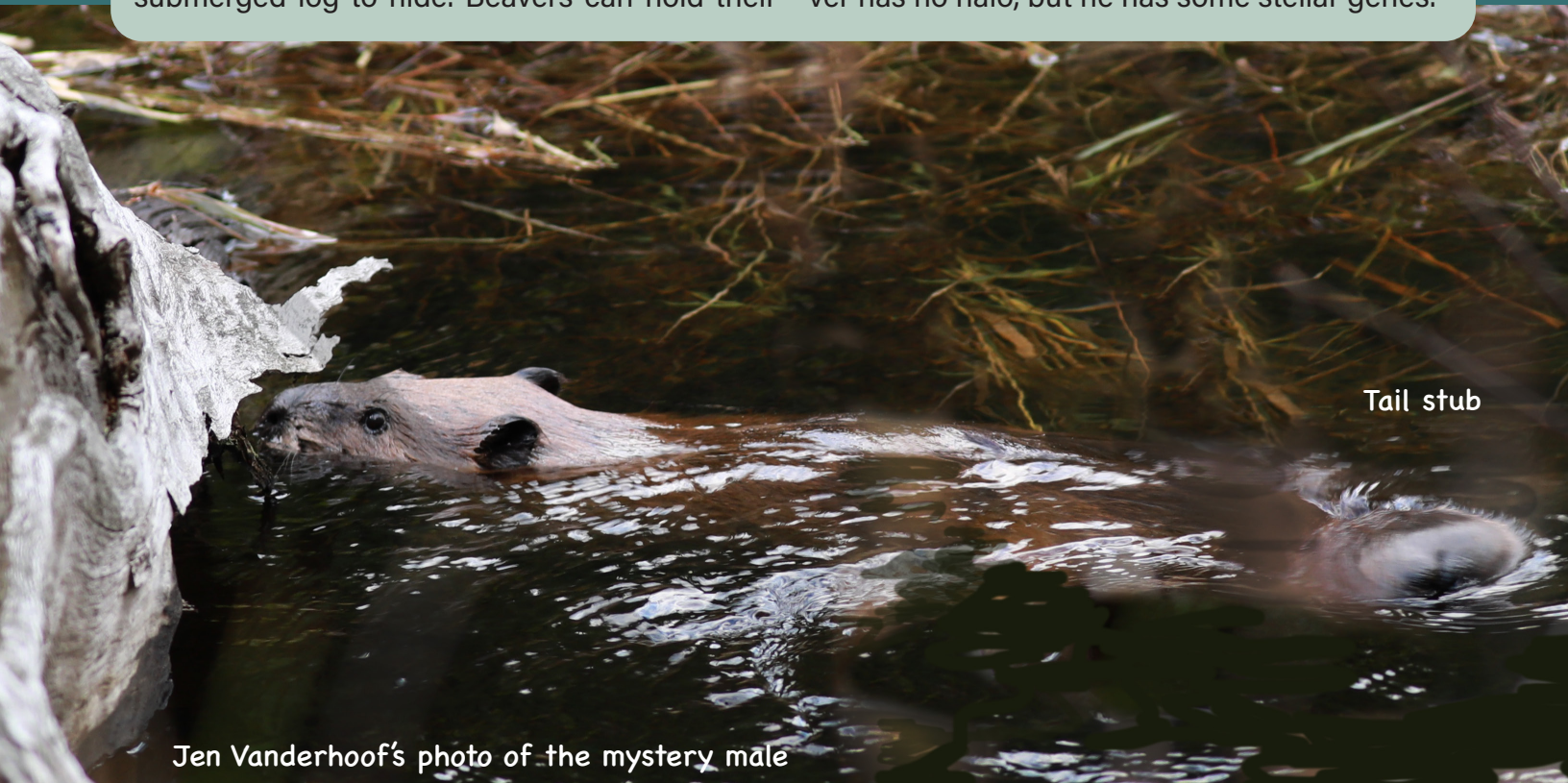
As Jen, Pamela, and I worked our way upstream along the beaver meadows, I saw a beaver swim past me underwater. I tried to see its tail since Dew's has distinctive battle scars. I couldn't see a tail on this beaver at all. Jen is a photographer and got a couple of photos before the beaver disappeared upstream again. At the northernmost dam, a beaver came drifting down a channel. Her tail was missing a chunk from her fight with another beaver and a slice from the claw of a bear. Dew! Dew!

Since then, I have been heading down to the brook most nights. I most often see Gentian at work in a new pond in the downstream section. Dew inhabits the upstream portion. One night, in the upstream region, I saw a beaver swimming underwater, the biggest beaver I had ever seen in this brook. I checked and then checked again. This beaver had no tail. He swam under a submerged log to hide. Beavers can hold their

breath for fifteen minutes in a pinch. I had no wish to cause a pinch for this fellow, so I set out to look for the other beavers.

As this puzzle piece clicked into place, a very curious picture was beginning to emerge: a beaver that suffered such a traumatic injury might well become extremely wary. Such a beaver might be invisible to a distracted beaver watcher for months. He was probably the beaver I had seen in Gentian's territory, too. This fellow was the likely father of Dew's kit. I think that when the puzzle is completed, the picture will reveal the sisters living next door to each other and sharing a mate. There are still enough pieces missing that I could be very wrong.

Downstream I found Gentian, deftly cleaving the bark from a birch branch. Upstream, Dew swam over to say hello and to enjoy an apple. Tendrils of mist flowed across the pond as the night cooled. I saw the tiny beaver near the spot where I had first seen the beaver with no tail. The small creature seemed preternaturally calm. As he climbed ashore to groom, I contemplated his parentage. His father might not be a deity, but he surely has superpowers. How else would a beaver survive the loss of such a major appendage? How else could he adapt to life without it? This little beaver has no halo, but he has some stellar genes.



Tail stub

Jen Vanderhoof's photo of the mystery male