

BEAVER

the Mammal with a Mountaineer Spirit

By Rich Rogers

While we may not know every reason Europeans left their homelands for the shores of America, we do know that pursuit of freedom and fortune played major roles. History tells us that one of the first professions in North America of both early explorers and settlers involved trapping and trading for furs to send back to the motherlands.

At that time, and for many years after, the main North American species sought for its valuable fur was a large rodent – the beaver. Ancestors on my mother’s side left extensive detailed records of their catches when they first settled what is now the eastern maritime provinces of Canada in the early 1600s. At that time, thousands of beaver pelts were shipped back across the Atlantic Ocean to enlarge the coffers of various monarchies.

Some of the first explorers moving westward across the continent went in search of beaver pelts that were quickly becoming scarce along the East Coast. This trend of trappers preceding actual settlement ended at the Rocky Mountains in the early- to mid-1800s. By that time beaver had become quite scarce throughout



It takes time, but a beaver can use its chisel-like teeth to fell large trees.

Photo by Len Rue, Jr.

much of their original range. This last major fur “boom” ended when beaver felt hats were no longer in fashion demand in Europe.

While West Virginia has never been a historic hot spot for beaver trappers, beavers were always easy to find due to the predictable branching pattern of creeks and rivers in the state’s mountains. One

account notes that by the mid-1700s, traders bought fur from the Catawba and Cherokee along the South Branch of the Potomac River. Other traders were doing business with Native Americans and trappers collecting fur throughout the country that is now known as West Virginia. Major trading posts serving the region were located on the present sites

of Pittsburgh, Cumberland (Maryland), and Point Pleasant (West Virginia).

Beaver numbers were greatly depleted soon after the American Revolution and extirpation occurred around 1825. This was the same time period that the last woodland bison and native elk were to be found in West Virginia. At the same time Catawba, Mingo,



Len Rue, Jr.

Beaver gathers sticks for his lodge.

Delaware, Shawnee, Cherokee and a few other peoples disappeared, and with them, the passing of the great era of the eastern wilderness.

A 1911-1912 report of the Forest, Game, and Fish Warden of West Virginia stated that “the many streams, mountains, and other natural features within our state that have the word ‘beaver’ as part of their name indicates the general distribution of the mammal here in an early day.” The last known colony at this time was located at Tearcoat Creek in Hampshire County in 1922. This colony disappeared soon after it was reported.

The beaver is the first known extirpated wildlife species to be reintroduced in West Virginia. This was accomplished through a joint effort by the West Virginia Conservation Commission and U.S. Forest Service between 1933 and 1940. The project received support after a severe drought in 1930 because dam-building activities of beaver help conserve water. All beaver in the original stockings were obtained from Michigan and Wisconsin and were placed in Mineral, Nicholas, Pocahontas, Randolph, Summers, Tucker, Wetzel and Wyoming counties.

Beaver now live in every county of the state with the vast majority found and harvested in the high mountain and Eastern Panhandle regions. A

1949 publication of the West Virginia Conservation Commission stated that due to agriculture and locations of human dwellings in bottomlands, little suitable range existed in the state which was not then occupied by beaver. Little did anyone realize how persistent, resilient and industrious beaver would turn out to be – truly an animal reflective of the hard-working nature of the Mountaineer.

A young mated pair of beaver can quickly colonize a suitable area. In West Virginia, breeding takes place in January or February with most young being born after a gestation period of about four months. Sometime before giving birth, the female will force the male out of the lodge or burrow, and he will not be allowed back until the kits have been given a chance to grow. The young will stay with the family for almost two years before striking out on their own. Thus, a colony may consist of three generations of beaver at any given time. The female gives birth to an average number of four young.

Adult beavers in West Virginia weigh between 35 and 45 pounds. Individuals in excess of 50 to 60 pounds are not uncommon. Males and females mark their territory by depositing scent from special glands located next to the anal/urogenital opening on pushed up mounds of mud and leaves on the bank. Trappers, armed with this knowledge along with the scent from



Snow-covered beaver dam at Green Bottom WMA.

Photo by Gary Sharp/WV DNR Photo



Leonard Lee Rue III

Beaver swims swiftly to its underwater entrance of its lodge.

another colony’s beaver, have put many beaver pelts on their hoop stretchers. Remarkably, effective beaver trapping techniques have not changed much since early times.

Beavers typically make their dens in bank burrows or lodges built and excavated by the beaver themselves. Bank dens are more common on large waterways where water levels fluctuate often. Stick lodges are more common on smaller streams or ponds.

Beavers build their dens with an underwater entrance and ventilation overhead. Biologists have measured temperatures inside lodges and found them to be quite a bit cooler in summer and warmer in winter than outside air.

In colder climates, such as the conditions that exist in our higher elevation counties, beaver live under ice all winter. They pile extensive food caches of green sticks underwater in the fall. This stored food may have to last all winter. Older West Virginians will tell you it will be a long, cold winter if beaver lay up a large food cache in the fall.

Beavers build dams for the protection of a semi-submerged den and food supply. All age classes participate in dam construction. Beavers use anything available that can be carried, pushed or floated. The dams are primarily made of stick, stone and mud. They are tightly constructed and very difficult to dismantle by hand.

Beaver prefer herbaceous vegetation for food in the summer and early fall. They prefer the living, inner layer under the bark of trees the rest of the year. Aspen is favored where found, but all hardwoods will be eaten. Beavers fell most trees to get at the succulent limbs at the top of the tree for food. They accomplish this with specialized chisel-like teeth that grow continually throughout the life of the animal. Anyone spending time around a beaver pond will notice the many peeled fresh sticks floating in the water or laying on the edge of the bank.

Although beavers aren’t aggressive by nature, a beaver bite can be quite nasty. Fortunately for other animals, most beaver fighting is what biologists call



Elizabeth Byers/WV DNR Photo

One of numerous beaver lodges in Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

➡ *Green frogs are one of many animals that inhabit beaver ponds. Photo by Johanna Ellis*

“intraspecific,” meaning among themselves. Trappers catching beaver late in the season will notice numerous crescent-shaped holes in many hides due to battles between beaver. Such blemishes decrease the value of a hide on the fur market and most trappers plan to trap before most of this infighting happens.

Although slow on land and possessing fairly poor eyesight, beavers are protected by a thick layer of fat during part of the year and a loose, thick hide. They warn away intruders by slapping their large flat tail on the water while surface diving, making a sound like someone slapping a canoe paddle on the water. Aggressive males also snuff their noses and growl at a threat while approaching in water. Numerous whinings, mewings and other sounds also have been recorded in dens.

At a point in history when wetlands are at a premium due to human development, beaver are champions at building them. Wildlife is attracted to, and abounds in and around beaver colonies. Where humans may see beaver as destructive, wildlife species experience them as the ultimate architect of prime wildlife real estate. Beaver ponds teem with birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, fish and mammals.

Due to a decline in numbers of trappers, poor fur prices and greater tolerance for beaver activities, beaver trapping seasons have been greatly liberalized since the reintroductions of the 1930s. Trapping season extends from the first Saturday of November until the end of March. There is no bag limit, which gives landowners experiencing damage to ornamental trees, timber or crops a longer time to take advantage of trapping opportunities. Regulated trapping today poses no threat to beaver populations in West Virginia. Yearly harvests have ranged from 1,000 to 2,000 animals for the last couple of decades. This harvest is highly dependent on fluctuations in fur prices on the market.

The return of beaver to its native range is a wildlife management success story. Resilient in the face of tragedy, industrious by nature, family-oriented, persistent when presented with obstacles, and gentle yet aggressively defensive of what is theirs, the beaver is truly a reflection of the mountain spirit that thrives in West Virginia to this day.

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