

BOREAL BITS

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THE BEAVER DAM

“Beauty is nature’s brag, and must be shown in courts, at feasts, and high solemnities, where most may wonder at the workmanship.” Milton (1608-1674)

At 2 a.m. on the morning of July 13, a beaver dam located 25 km west of Kenora gave way. The resultant rush of water washed away a section of the Trans Canada Highway disrupting national traffic patterns and rerouting those in need of rapid highway travel through the U.S. Janet Gibson who covered the event for the Kenora Daily Miner and News quoted a Ministry of Transportation repair crew members as saying, “The Americans have Al Qaida. We have a beaver that shuts down the whole country.” That beaver must be amazed at what his efforts had wrought.

Perhaps it is time to review our national symbol and exactly what this aquatic rodent is capable of achieving. The fact was not lost on Dave Wilton, who called to observe that you wouldn’t see this extent of damage perpetrated by the bald eagle, the national symbol of the United States. But in Canada, well, we are different.

A few years ago, a beaver pond was created less than a half a kilometre from our house when a pair of beavers took advantage of a stream and a new highway construction to build a dam. Our national rodent, so prominently displayed on our nickel coin, created a dam that raised the water so dramatically it became a danger to human traffic. Eventually the rodents were trapped and the problem was solved. However, while the beavers were building the dam, there was an excellent opportunity for observers to learn how they went about it.



(P Burke)

Beavers are the subjects of certain myths. An early myth reported that beavers would pile sticks and mud on a family member who is lying on its back. While the prone rodent clutches onto the building materials, other members of the family will drag it to the work site, something akin to using another beaver as a wheelbarrow. Yet another myth stated that beavers loaded their broad tails with mud and hauled it to the work site. Also beavers do not ‘pat down’ and flatten the mud by slapping the work piece with their tails.

The ‘rebar’ in a beaver lodge or dam is in the form of sticks cut by the beavers. Often they will chew the bark off first—they don’t eat wood—and then will push the sticks in mud or entangle it among other sticks. Beavers will move

tonnes of mud. They push mud bound together by roots of grass, weeds and shrubs through the pond by holding it against their chest with their paws. Mud is the mortar of the dam and comes from the bottom of the pond and from beaver trails created to provide additional depth for easier and safer beaver travel. In some ponds they will clear the bottom of mud so thoroughly that some trees and shrubs will topple from lack of support.



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Once built, the dam needs continual upkeep and beavers may be seen in the late evening, night and morning working away to ensure sufficient maintenance is done. If the dam fails, the safety of the beaver family is compromised. Also the underwater entrances to the beaver lodge may be revealed.

This brings up the question of 'damless' beavers. There are some beavers that do not build a dam because there is nowhere to build one and if they did, it would in no way contribute to the depth of the water. These beavers usually build their lodges on banks or near the shore of rivers or lakes. Considering the time normal beaver put into dam maintenance it makes one wonder what these beavers do with all their spare time.

The beavers that caused the problem on the TransCanada Highway were most

likely busy rebuilding their dam minutes after the dam failure occurred on that early morning of July 13. Humans interested in discouraging a family of beavers quickly find that tearing out the dam is no way to control the problem because the beavers will repair it again and again. Years ago members of our local township council attempted to solve the beaver pond-alongside-the-highway problem by sending in a backhoe to remove the dam. This was done four or five times but on each occasion the beavers were at work before the backhoe drove away. The only permanent solution is to trap them.

Only in Canada, eh?