

BEAVERS ON MOUNT DESERT ISLAND

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1925

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History

There are abundant signs to show that beavers once inhabited Mount Desert Island in large numbers. Old beaver dams are found up to the banks of many small streams and most marshes and swamps are of beaver origin where ponds have been held until filled up with silt and vegetation. The rocky shores of the beaver ponds and lakes show little trace of beaver work but in some banks there are still indentations where their channels and bank houses were once located. There is undoubtedly ample historical proof of this abundance in the early trapping days but in talking with the old-timers on the island, I have been unable to get any record of beavers known to occur here within their recollection or knowledge.

In 1920 I am told that one beaver was brought to the island and turned out on Otter Creek where it remained for some time, building dams and a house, but later it was known to have died or been killed. In 1921 four beavers were brought to the island from further north in the State of Maine and turned loose in the Park on Bubble Brook near Eagle Lake. These have gone on increasing and spreading from stream to stream and from lake to lake over the island until now there are a considerable number, probably twenty-five or thirty beavers scattered

in different places, a few in the Breakneck Ponds, in Witch Hole Pond, in New Mill Meadows Ponds, in Eagle Lake and on Little Hunters Beach Brook. In all I have examined nine beaver houses that are occupied or have been recently occupied. There are many dams and some old houses that are not used. Many of the dams are built on the foundations of old dams, abandoned probably one hundred and fifty to two hundred years ago.

Damage by Beavers

As usual where beavers are not well understood, their first appearance is hailed with many complaints of damage done to the forests and meadows, and such damage on the island has been carefully studied with a view to ascertaining its nature and extent. As in most cases, the principal damage is not from the timber but by the beavers for food and building material, but from the timber killed by the water of their ponds. In several places on the island, this has been considerable. The worst case of timber destruction is on Bubble Brook close to where it enters Eagle Lake. About thirty acres of small swamp timber, including soft maples, ash, birch and some cedar, was killed by the beaver ponds extending across the road near the lake. This timber was killed two years ago and has been cut and used for wood and other purposes but the stumps are still unsightly and will be until the second growth comes up. The two dams which held up this pond have been broken and the beavers driven away with a good deal of work and expense.

Most of this damage and expense could have been easily prevented by putting a drain through the beaver dam while it was small and preventing a pond in that locality.

Another locality where considerable damage to timber has occurred is at the head of Witch Hole Pond. By throwing a dam across the outlet of this pond, the beavers raised the water about three feet and flooded some forty acres of swamp land, covered with small hemlocks, cedar, maple and birch, and a thick undergrowth of alder and other shrubs. Most of this timber was killed by the water and about half of it has been cut and removed for fire wood. The wood has little commercial value and when removed, the beaver pond will make a very attractive lake about twice as large as the original Witch Hole Pond. This is away from the main roads and the temporary disfigurement is of small consequence. The surrounding slopes contain much excellent beaver food in the form of aspens, yellow poplar and bush maples and a large number of beaver, probably two hundred, could easily find a permanent food supply.

Along Duck Brook or New Mill Meadow, the beavers have killed a little small timber by flooding, but so little as to be of no serious consequence. They have formed three small ponds and have three dams and two good occupied houses near the road where they can be seen and enjoyed by many people.

On Mr. Rockefeller's estate, just north of Long Pond, four beavers became established in 1924 and built several dams across Jordan Brook in the meadow above the pond. Their ponds had begun to flood a considerable area of swamp timber of cedar, maple and birch and a few trees were turning yellow. To prevent

the destruction of the timber in this beautiful valley with roads along both sides, permission was granted by the State authorities for trapping the beavers and three were caught and killed in the spring of 1925. Another was caught by the toes but escaped and disappeared. In this case the beavers would have done serious damage by leaving a swamp of dead timber in an otherwise beautiful basin and also by damming up and obstructing a fine spring brook well stocked with trout and their destruction seemed fully justifiable. However, they could easily have been captured alive in a cage trap and removed to other localities where they would have done no harm.

In other places on the island the beavers are working in an interesting way without doing any harm to timber or land and in still other places which they have not yet reached, large numbers of beavers could be safely maintained as a fur supply or as interesting animal life for the benefit of those who delight in nature study.

In many places beaver dams are said to interfere with fishing by keeping the trout from their spawning grounds. This theory may and may not be well founded, but in many localities the best trout fishing is found in the beaver ponds. During high water or after heavy rainfalls, the water usually flows over the dams in such an amount that the trout can pass over them, but where necessary, fishways could be constructed over the beaver dams.

The contention that mosquitoes increase with the appearance of beaver ponds is in most cases absurd. Water that

is held at a permanent level will soon acquire enough animal life, small fish, etc., to devour the mosquito larvae, although a new pond might furnish temporary breeding grounds for mosquitoes. The fact that mosquitoes do not fly during their life time over a mile from the place where they were hatched, is in most cases sufficient evidence that their unusual numbers are not due to distant beaver ponds.

Value of Beavers

The question is often asked, "But what are they good for?" and to some people it seems hardly worthwhile to explain that a large, intelligent animal working industriously along its own lines of activity could have any value other than commercial. To most people, however, the opportunity to see such animals and become familiar with their habits in their wild state and in beautiful woodland scenery is worth more than any mere cash value. Even the houses and dams and ponds constructed by the beavers are interesting studies in themselves but when the animals can be seen, as they often can be at their evening and morning work, gathering food, cutting trees, building dams and putting sticks and mud on their houses against the winter cold, there is a pleasure and enjoyment that we feel in watching few other animals. Still more where the beaver can be captured alive or fed on the banks until he can be brought into close quarters, are their intelligence and human sympathy appreciated.

On the other hand, beavers have a cash value that is not negligible. After providing many fortunes in the early trapping

and trading days, they were recklessly destroyed until almost forgotten, but now as they are being protected and brought back to their original range over much of the country, they are proving again one of our best fur bearers and are adding substantial returns in some parts of the country where wisely handled.

After a hurried survey of a considerable part of Mount Desert Island, I should make a tentative estimate that two thousand beavers could be maintained as a permanent stock in the suitable places on the island where no damage would be done by them. This number could be considerably increased by intensive beaver farming on private lands. The annual cash value of these fur bearers at an average price of \$25 per skin would amount to a considerable sum, as they breed rapidly and easily double in numbers each year. If the beavers were kept under full control, however, so that only the best skins of mature and full-grown animals were marketed, the value would be considerably increased, or if breeding stock could be furnished to other localities where beaver farms were being started, a still better price could be obtained for the live animals without the necessity of killing them for fur.

Beaver Control

The mistake is often made of placing beavers in unsuitable sites where they can do serious damage and can not be easily controlled. They should not be placed where a slight rise of the water level will flood and kill valuable timber, or where they can feed on crops and fruit trees along the shores. On Mount Desert Island are many streams, ponds and lakes where the

beaver would be entirely harmless and would thrive and increase to the full number that would stock the waters. Such locations that might be devoted especially to beaver colonies are Aunt Betty's Pond with the streams entering it, the Witch Hole Pond and many smaller areas of excellent beaver ground. From a hasty survey it would seem that Aunt Betty's Pond would carry permanently two hundred beavers and supply them with ample food from the surrounding slopes and along the small streams entering the pond. This number could be increased by feeding in autumn, merely cutting and hauling some aspen or poplar trees down the slopes to the water to supply winter food for the beavers. If necessary, a fence could be built across Richardson's Brook below the pond to prevent the beavers going down into Somes Sound and up other streams in the neighborhood, unless the animals were desired along these streams.

Beavers can be held in almost any suitable location up to the limit of the food supply. During the summer they feed largely upon water plants, lilies, rushes, grasses, sedges and the small vegetation along the shores of the pond and streams, but in winter their main food supply consists of bark from the trees and bushes which they store up under water before the ice forms in the fall. The summer food supply is much more ample than the winter and it is mainly in obtaining a winter supply of suitable foods that beavers may need help. Aspen and other species of poplar are their favorite food trees but the small striped and mountain maple and pin-cherry are equally sought for and stored for winter use. Occasionally a birch or maple or oak or hemlock

tree is cut along the bank of a stream or pond, but usually for building material, rather than for food. Pines and other conifers and most hard woods are rarely cut by beavers.

Fencing beavers in cases where it is important to keep them from extending their range is usually not difficult. Often by fencing across a brook and a short distance out on either side, they can be prevented from going up or down a stream. A heavy chicken wire fence will hold them on the land, but under water, it is necessary to have the fence of heavier wire and well fastened down along the bottom and banks.

The level of a beaver pond can be easily controlled by placing a drain pipe through the dam with the upper end on the bottom of the pond well covered with stones to prevent the beavers from filling it up with mud, and the other end opening out through the dam at whatever level it is necessary to hold the water of the pond. By connecting another pipe with the down stream end of this drain and with the water below, a simple fishway may be made for the purpose of letting trout come up over the dam and out through the stone pile above.

Trapping alive in cage traps is a simple method of moving beavers from places where they are not desired to more suitable locations and controlling their abundance and distribution. Large wire traps can be set under water so they will come up around the beavers when they swim against the triggers. This does not injure nor frighten the animals. However, for beaver farming, a more convenient method of catching is by means of corrals built on the banks where the beavers are in the habit of feeding or

where food is placed for them until they come regularly into the corrals and can be enclosed and selected at will. With ordinary trapping methods, most of the beavers caught are young of the year, not half grown and of little fur value.

Beavers are easily trapped and their present scarcity over much of the country is due to illegal trapping and poaching. On private land they can be given better protection and can be fenced to keep out intruders and dogs. On National Park lands they should be entirely under the control of park authorities to insure a permanent policy of management. If any beavers are to be caught on park lands, it should be by park authorities and with the best methods for handling and selecting, whether for breeding purposes and transportation, or for fur. To let them go on increasing indefinitely without regard to food supply would be as fatal to all interests and as destructive to the beavers, as would open and competitive trapping for the fur. Beaver cultivation has future possibilities that are just beginning to be realized.