

Living with Wildlife – Beavers – Part I

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There is increasing recognition that Beavers (*Castor Canadensis*) play a vital role in the environment. This week we will tell you about the animal while next week more about its contribution, the conflicts sometimes caused with humans and what some communities are doing to co-exist with beavers.

The beaver is the national symbol of Canada, an appropriate one given this mammal's ability to utilize natural resources. Its engineering ability is second only to man. It is `ironic, however, that when we destroy hundreds of trees for our homes and roads, it's called the 'price of progress', when a beaver cuts down a few trees to shelter and feed its family, it's called 'destruction'.

The beaver is the largest rodent native to North America, weighing from 16 to 32 kg. Ungainly and slow on land, it is a graceful and strong swimmer. Its large flat tail serves as a rudder in the water and as a counterbalance when walking and holding building materials such as sticks, stones and mud.

Its long, sharp, strong incisors grow continuously. With them, beaver are able to fell very large trees. Their lips close behind the incisors, permitting the beaver to gnaw on twigs while under water.

Beavers construct dams to maintain sufficient water level to keep their families safe from predators as well as allow access during winter freeze up. They build lodges which include a feeding den, a sleeping chamber and usually two underwater entrance tunnels to be able to escape predators.

In fall, they construct food caches of branches underwater close to their lodge to sustain them over the winter. They prefer trembling aspen, poplar, willow and birch, all common and fast-growing trees. They shift from a woody diet to a herbaceous one as new growth appears in spring. During summer, beavers will eat grasses, herbs, leaves of woody plants, fruits, and aquatic plants. They are most active between dusk and dawn.

Beavers have an elaborate society in which the family is the basic unit, and the female the central figure. Adults mate for life. If the female loses her mate, she remains with her family, when another male will join her in the mating season.

Mating occurs in January and February and following a 100-day gestation period, three or four kits are born in May or June. The young stay with their parents until they are two and sometimes three years old before leaving the colony.

More on beavers next week. In the meantime, for all your wildlife questions visit www.wildlifeinfo.ca.