

The Beaver

by Jim Spencer



Description and Distribution

The beaver (*Castor canadensis*) is Arkansas' most controversial furbearer. Once exterminated from the state by unregulated trapping, beavers were re-established and are now found statewide.

The beaver is the largest rodent in the U.S., reaching 4-1/2 feet in length. The average adult weight is 40 to 60 pounds.

Beavers are well adapted for their aquatic existence. They're "bottom-heavy," with well-developed hindquarters and small chest and forequarters. Their huge hind feet are webbed and driven by large muscles that propel the beaver's streamlined body through the water.

The beaver's tail is large and flat. It's furred at the base but is mostly covered with leathery scales. The tail is slapped loudly on the water to warn other beavers of possible danger. It also serves as a balancing platform when cutting down a tree on dry land or a rudder when swimming or diving. It's not used to move mud to the dam or lodge as some have claimed. Mud is clutched to the beaver's chest with its small, hand-like front feet when transported.

Other adaptations make the beaver virtually waterproof. Valves in the ears and nostrils close when the beaver submerges, and its dense underfur is impervious to water. A split claw on each hind foot enables the beaver to evenly distribute waterproofing body oil when grooming and cleaning its

fur. The beaver has large lungs and can stay underwater for up to 15 minutes.

Habitat

Originally, beavers occupied most of forested North America. In Arkansas, most are found in the Delta, Gulf Coastal Plain and Arkansas River Valley. They occur in lesser numbers in the Ozark and Ouachita mountains. Favorite habitats include streams, natural lakes and farm country irrigation reservoirs and canals.

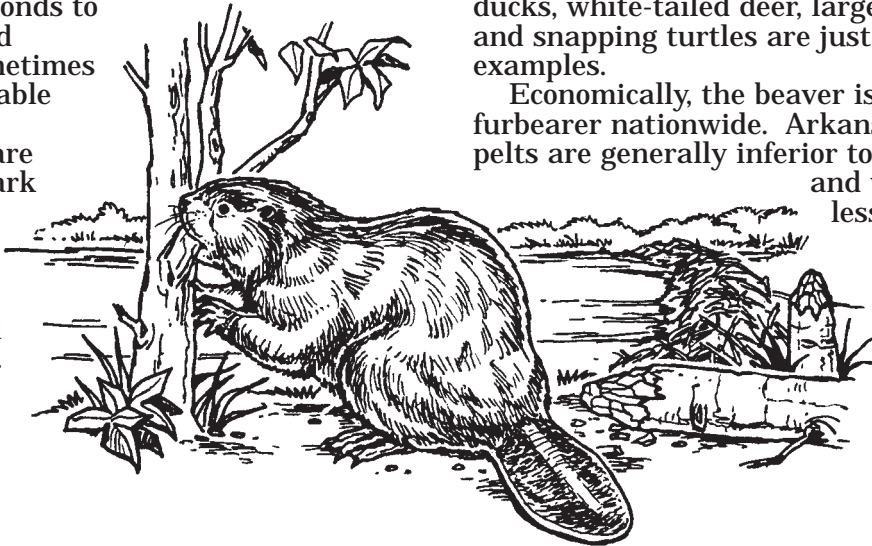
Habits

The expression "busy as a beaver" fits. The beaver is one of the few animals able to alter its own habitat.

Beavers living in large lakes and rivers usually den in the banks. Beaver families residing along small streams become engineers. They build dams to raise and stabilize the water level, turning the stream into a series of ponds. Lodges of limbs and mud are built in their main pond. These large stick houses rise out of the water like giant brushpiles.

Beavers are also noted for their canal building. Canals are built from their ponds to outlying food sources, sometimes for considerable distances.

Beavers are primarily bark eaters. They prefer the tender bark of twigs and new growth.



Along rivers, cottonwoods and willows are favorites. Other food trees include oak, elm, hickory, dogwood, sycamore and witch hazel. Aquatic plants such as pond lily, watercress, arrowhead, burreed and water willow are also eaten.

Reproduction

Beavers usually mate for life. The typical litter of four young is born in April, May or June after a three-month pregnancy. Kits are well-developed at birth. Their eyes are already open, and incisor teeth are present. Within a month, they're weaned and feeding on grasses and aquatic plants. Young beavers usually stay with their parents for one to two years before establishing their own families.

Importance

To say the beaver is "important" is an understatement. Unfortunately, some of that importance has a negative nature. Beavers often flood valuable pastureland, timberland or cropland by damming culverts and streams. Their tree-cutting habits may clash with yard beautification plans of streamside home owners.

Not everything a beaver does is damaging. Dams that flood valuable property also create aquatic habitat for an amazingly diverse variety of wildlife. Otters, wood ducks, white-tailed deer, largemouth bass and snapping turtles are just a few examples.

Economically, the beaver is an important furbearer nationwide. Arkansas beaver pelts are generally inferior to northern pelts and worth much less.

Historically, beavers provided much of the stimulus for

exploring North America. Beaver felt hats were popular in Europe during the early 1800s, and the New World wilderness teemed with an estimated 60 million beavers. Trappers worked their way across the country, taking beavers as they went. Settlers followed in their footsteps when word of fertile lands and abundant natural resources filtered back east.

By 1900, only 100,000 beavers were left in the country. In Arkansas, they were exterminated.

Management

Beavers were re-established in Arkansas during the past 60 years. Seventy-six were stocked in the state

between 1926 and 1945. Others migrated in from surrounding states. Because fur prices are relatively low and beaver trapping is difficult work, they've rapidly expanded their range. The only management needed in Arkansas today is trapping and hunting in areas where they become a nuisance.

The beaver is a vital member of Arkansas's wildlife community. Despite the damage they cause, beavers are responsible for creating thousands of acres of valuable wetland habitat. In a world where wetlands are quickly disappearing, that makes the beaver very important, indeed.



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