

How a Beaver Builds His House

from Bingley's *Animal Biography*
Author Unknown

If we could look back and see England and Wales as they were about a thousand years ago, we should most likely think that the best houses and most prosperous villages were the work not of the Saxon or British natives, but of the little beavers, which were then to be found in some of the rivers, though they have long ceased to exist there. Those who want to see what beavers can do, must look to America, and there, either in Canada or even as far south as Louisiana, they will find the little creatures as busy as ever and as clever at house-building as when they taught our forefathers a lesson in the time of Athelstan or Canute.

A beaver is a small animal measuring about three feet, and has fine glossy dark brown hair. Its tail, which is its trowel, and call bell, and many other things besides, is nearly a foot long, and has no hair at all, and is divided into little scales, something like a fish. Beavers cannot bear to live by themselves, and are never happy unless they have two or three hundred friends close at hand whom they can visit every day and all day, and they are the best and most kindly neighbours in the world, always ready to help each other either in building new villages or in repairing old ones.

Of course the first thing to be done when you wish to erect a house or a village is to fix on a suitable site, and the spot which every beaver of sense thinks most desirable is either a large pond or, if no pond is to be had, a flat low plain with a stream running through, out of which a pond can be made.

It must be a very, very long while since beavers first found out that the way to make a pond out of a stream was to build a dam across it so strong that the water could not break through. To begin with, they have to know which way the stream runs, and in this they never make a mistake. Then they gather together stakes about five feet long, and fix them in rows tight into the ground on each side of the stream; and while the older and more experienced beavers are doing this—for the safety of the village depends on the strength of the foundation—the younger and more active ones are fetching and heaping up green branches of trees. These branches are plaited in and out of the rows of stakes, which by this time stretch right across the river, and form a dam often as much as a hundred feet from end to end. When the best workmen among them declare the foundation solid, the rest form a large wall over the whole, of stones, clay, and sand, which gradually tapers up from ten or twelve feet at the bottom, where it has to resist the pressure of the stream, to two or three at the top, so that the beavers can, if necessary, pass each other in comfort. And when the dam is pronounced finished, the overseer or head beaver goes carefully over every part, to see that it is the proper shape and exactly smooth and even, for beavers cannot bear bad work, and would punish any of their tribe who were lazy or careless.

The dam being ready and the pond made, they can now begin to think about their houses, and as all beavers have a great dislike to damp floors and wet beds, they have to raise their dwellings quite six or eight feet above the level of the stream, so that no sudden swelling of the river during the rainy season shall make them cold and uncomfortable. Beavers are always quite clear in their minds as to what they want, and how to get it, and they like to keep things distinct. When they are in the water they are perfectly happy, but when they are out of it they like to be dry, and in order to keep their houses warm and snug they wait till the water is low during the summer, and then they can drive piles into the bed of the stream with more safety and less trouble than if the river is running hard. It generally takes two or three months before the village is finished, and the bark and shoots of young trees, which is their

favourite food, collected and stored up. But the little round huts, not unlike beehives, are only intended for winter homes, as no beaver would think of sleeping indoors during the summer, or, indeed, of staying two days in the same place. So every three or four years they spend the long days in making their village of earth, stones, and sticks, plastered together with some kind of mortar which they carry about on their tails, to spread neatly over the inside of their houses. All that a beaver does is beautifully finished as well as substantial. The walls of his house are usually about two feet thick, and sometimes he has as many as three stories to his house, when he has a large family or a number of friends to live with him. One thing is quite certain: no beaver will ever set up housekeeping alone; but sometimes he will be content with one companion, and sometimes he will have as many as thirty. But however full the hut may be, there is never any confusion; each beaver has his fixed place on the floor, which is covered with dried leaves and moss, and as they manage to keep open a door right below the surface of the stream, where their food is carefully stored up, there is no fear that they will ever be starved out. And there they lie all through the winter, and get very fat.

Once a French gentleman who was travelling through Louisiana, was very anxious to see the little beaver colony at work, so he hid himself with some other men close to a dam, and in the night they cut a channel about a foot wide right through, and very hard labour they found it.

The men had made no noise in breaking the dam, but the rush of the water aroused one beaver who slept more lightly than the rest, and he instantly left his hut and swam to the dam to examine what was wrong. He then struck four loud blows with his tail, and at the sound of his call every beaver left his bed and came rushing to see what was the matter. No sooner did they reach the dam and see the large hole made in it, than they took counsel, and then the one in whom they put the most trust gave orders to the rest, and they all went to the bank to make mortar. When they had collected as much as they could carry, they formed a procession, two and two, each pair loading each others' tails, and so travelling they arrived at the dam, where a relay of fresh labourers were ready to load. The mortar was then placed in the hole and bound tight by repeated blows from the beavers' tails. So hard did they work and so much sense did they show, that in a short time all was as firm as ever. Then one of the leading spirits clapped his tail twice, and in a moment all were in bed and asleep again.

Beavers are very hard-working, but they know how to make themselves comfortable too, and if they are content with bark and twigs at home, they appreciate nicer food if they can get it. A gentleman once took a beaver with him to New York, and it used to wander about the house like a dog, feeding chiefly upon bread, with fish now and then for a treat. Not being able to find any moss or leaves for a bed, it used to seize upon all the soft bits of stuff that came in its way, and carry them off to its sleeping corner. One day a cat discovered its hiding place, and thought it would be a nice comfortable place for her kittens to sleep, and when the beaver came back from his walk he found, like the three bears, that someone was sleeping in his bed. He had never seen things of that kind before, but they were small and he was big, so he said nothing and lay down somewhere else. Only, if ever their mother was away, he would go and hold one of them to his breast to warm it, and keep it there till its mother came back.

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