

IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Beavers: Nature's Lumberjacks

The waterways and landscapes of Ohio have been changed by the American beaver, also known as *castor Canadensis*. The largest North American rodents, beavers occupy a remarkable ecological and historical niche.

These stout animals typically weigh 35-60 pounds, and are 35-45 inches long when they reach adulthood. The most unusual and obvious physical characteristic of the beaver is its broad, flat, scaly tail, which serves as a brace while sitting erect, and acts as a rudder while swimming. The tail is 10-12 inches long. When danger is present beavers warn one another by thwacking their tails on the water. Beavers are known for their buck teeth, incisors that grow throughout the animal's life and are sharpened when used to cut down trees. Their primary food is tree bark. With their powerful teeth, they can fell a 5 inch diameter tree in 30 minutes. Their scent glands produce castoreum which waterproofs their fur.

They live near water in homes or lodges constructed of branches and mud. If a lodge is not feasible, beavers abide in dens – burrows on the banks of a river. Lodges can be as large as 6 feet high and 30 feet across. After felling branches and cutting them into manageable lengths, beavers drag them to a selected site. The lodge consists of several chambers, and the entrances are tunneled underwater. After sticks are in place, the colony plasters the lodge with mud, sealing it from the elements.



Lodges are often situated near dams created by the beavers. These dams provide water of sufficient depth to allow the beaver to move about safely and transport food with ease. Beaver dams come in all shapes and sizes. These elaborate water control projects demand the skills of an engineer, and the tenacious beaver completes them without any tools but his teeth. Dams create ponds where there is a stable water environment – not just for the beaver, but for other wildlife too. Such ponds check erosion, provide water holes for fish, sustain even water flow, and are depositories for downstream sediment.

Cherokees believed that the Creator sent beavers diving to the bottom of water to carry mud to the surface to form dry land. Crow Indians thought they would be reincarnated as beavers, so they believed beavers were kinfolk. Early pioneers used their castoreum as a cure for colic, rheumatism, pleurisy and sexual impotence. Europeans in the New World harvested beaver from the 1500s until the 1800s. Fur companies used beaver pelts (called “soft gold”) as currency. Voyageurs and mountain men penetrated the continent, trapping beavers and sending pelts back to Europe for fashionable hats. Trapping and deforestation nearly made North American beavers extinct in the 1800s, but they made a comeback in the 1900s due to national restocking and protection programs. In 1954, the beaver was reintroduced to Ohio, and now there are over 40,000 – with a presence in every county.

Beavers change the environment they live in more than any other animal. Sometimes their dams have a negative impact, and create floods. And other times the dams are environmentally beneficial. Their fur is still in demand for robes, coats, and other articles of attire; and their castoreum is a fixative in perfume. They create habitat for other species when they girdle trees.

Locally the Little Miami River has a significant beaver population, and there are established lodges at Indian Hill's Grand Valley Preserve. Recently an evening program was held to learn about these mammals, and residents were fascinated by these amazingly industrious animals.