

Beavers shape the land

The sticks and mud dam impounded a pond no deeper than a child's play pool. Here in the nearly dry St. Vrain River, four months after the September 2013 flood, a beaver was trying to impose his will on the ruined landscape. The animal, most likely an exiled resident of the destroyed McConnell ponds in Lyons, responded to the loss of its home in the instinctual manner of all of these oversized rodents – find running water and build a dam.

Too often we use anthropomorphic terms to describe animals and with the beaver that's easy to do: they are often called "nature's engineers" and are described as "industrious." And who has not used the term "busy as a beaver?" The large rodents (45-60 pounds) have a single-mindedness in damming streams and felling trees. But the fact is they are only responding to natural urges to create ponds for their homes and gather food.

Beavers are generally divided into two types: those that live in lodges of sticks and mud in their created ponds and those that live in excavated homes along large rivers and lakes – so-called "bank beavers." A pair of beavers will produce 3-5 young each year, who will eventually leave to establish their own homes. Beavers generally live four to five years and are preyed on by bears, mountain lions and bobcats. The occasional outbreak of tularemia can also destroy entire colonies up and down a river drainage.

Changing the landscape

Aside from man, no creature has a greater ability to affect a landscape. To the good, they create rich wetlands, make open meadows in the woods and provide unparalleled wildlife habitat. Beaver ponds store water and prevent erosion and flooding. The ponds provide habitat for fish, amphibians and birds. The constant cutting and regrowth of brush and trees along a beaver pond's fringe provide food and shelter for birds, mammals and amphibians. Eventually, a beaver pond will silt in, the beavers will outgrow the available food and the pond will be abandoned. In its place a meadow will grow on the rich silt left behind and a vibrant meadow of grasses, brush and trees will take its place.

On the flip side, beavers can flood agricultural fields and residential property and cut down desirable trees. One reason beaver numbers are reduced along the Front Range is their extirpation as nuisances to agriculture.

Long before man arrived in North America, beavers flourished, including a Pleistocene Age version that was as big as a small automobile. Native Americans used beaver for both food and for their hides, but it wasn't until European explorers and settlers arrived that the fortunes of the prolific rodent took a turn for the worse.

Hats spelled demise

Long recognized by European haberdashers for their value in creating felt for stylish hats, beaver pelts were becoming rare in the 1700's as the animals were trapped near to extinction in the Old World. But as colonies were established in the New World, the exploitation of North American beavers began in

earnest. French, Dutch and English established trading companies. Steel traps and guns, combined with Native Americans' knowledge and their willingness to trade, spelled near-doom for North American beavers. Fortunes were made on the unsustainable harvest of beavers and by the mid-1800's, beavers were on the brink of extinction.

Fortunately, the popularity of the beaver hat declined when silk hats became the latest fashion rage, and beaver populations began a slow rebound. Yet even today it is estimated that beavers occupy only 10-20 percent of their ancestral range.

Colorado beavers

Here in Colorado, beavers are mostly found in the high country. While an occasional beaver may be found along the Front Range, the riparian habitats they need have largely been usurped by agriculture. Where they do exist, they are many times in conflict with humans through their penchant for flooding property, damming irrigation ditches and damaging trees.

Beaver harvest is regulated by Colorado Parks & Wildlife. The last accurate data showed trappers took 1147 animals in the 2012-2013 season. Harvest numbers have been declining not necessarily because the numbers of animals has declined, but because fewer people are trapping – a trend seen across the United States.

Colorado residents have come to recognize the value of these animals for their creation of wildlife habitat and water storage. In fact, beavers are being introduced in some areas like South Park where they are used to improve fish habitat and raise the water table for ranchers and farmers. A 2003 Washington state study found that streams with beaver ponds produced 60 percent more fish than those without beavers. The ponds boost insect populations and vegetation and provide flood control, keeping woody debris from being washed away.

Gone are the days when a beaver was only recognized as a source of hat material. Instead, we now realize its great value as a creator of healthy habitat for fish and wildlife.

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