



## The beaver is a Colorado native

Being a native of Colorado is a rare thing these days. Most folks are transplants, myself included. I started life in Chicago, and after a brief visit to Wisconsin, I found my way here. My wife is one of those natives, hailing from the town of Golden. She does not advertise it by displaying one of those “native” stickers on her truck, like some people do.



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

If there were ever a member of the animal kingdom who deserves a “native” sticker, it would be the beaver. The North American beaver is native to our state, and his role as an environmental engineer has greatly impacted our ecology and helped shape our history.

My relationship with beavers usually revolved around “beaver ponds.” As a young kid, finding a pond was like striking gold for a young trout fisherman. I still get excited today, when I find a pond that has not been visited by other fisherman.

Beavers played such a role in Canadian history that the mammal is the country’s official animal symbol. Beavers were the first natural resource to be exploited by Europeans. Their pelts were so valuable; at one time they were treated as a unit of currency.

They are the largest members of the rodent family and fairly abundant today. It is difficult to imagine that they were once on the verge of extinction because of fur trapping. The soft and thick fur was once used for making felt for beaver hats. The introduction of silk hats as a fashion around 1930 is what probably saved the beaver from extinction. Prior to that time, beaver pelt trade is what opened up the Colorado mountains to European exploration.

Adult beavers may run 4 feet in length and weigh upwards of 45 pounds. Being herbivorous, they eat leaves, twigs and bark of most tree species. For winter food, they will stockpile branches in the mud at the bottom of their ponds.

Beavers have long, orange-colored front teeth. The teeth are orange, not because of poor brushing habits, but because they contain iron in their tooth enamel. Beavers need incredibly strong teeth so they can gnaw through tree trunks. The iron-filled enamel on the front of their teeth wears away more slowly than the white denim on the back. This makes the beavers teeth “self sharpening” as they chew on trees.

The social hierarchy of the beavers is based around the family unit. The adult female is the central figure and big boss (similar to our house). The usual family may have 10 to 12 members, consisting of adults, kits and yearlings from the previous years. The kits can swim 24 hours after birth.

Nocturnal by nature, beavers are usually not seen in the daytime. They are excellent swimmers and can remain submerged for up to 15 minutes at a time. Their body structure leaves them somewhat vulnerable to predators while on land, so they spend most of their time in the water.

They have a flat, black, scaly tail that serves two purposes. One is a signaling device that signals danger when



(Top) The beavers have this stream pretty well dammed up. They can build a dam like this overnight. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay) (Above) A close-up of a pair of beavers inside of their lodge. (Courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

slapped on the surface of the water. The second use of the tail is for fat storage.

The beaver has excellent hearing and a great sense of smell. They are, however, burdened with poor eyesight. They have transparent eyelids, which acts like goggles when the beavers are swimming.

Beavers build their homes, called lodges, out of sticks, twigs, rocks and mud. These lodges may be surrounded by water, or touching land, and include burrows dug into the surrounding banks.

What beavers are really known for are dams across rivers and streams. Most dams average 150 feet in length, stand 6 feet tall, and may reach an additional 4 feet underwater. These dams will cause artificial ponds, where the creatures can later build their lodges. Ask any trout fisherman about beaver ponds and their benefit to the fishery.

The world’s largest beaver dam was actually discovered on a satellite image in 2007. The dam measured 850 meters long and is located deep in the wilds on Northern Alberta. Scientists believe that multiple generations have been working on the dam since the 1970s.

A lodge is quite an engineering marvel. Beavers will first make a huge pile of sticks, followed by eating out several underwater entrances. Two platforms will then be constructed above the water’s surface inside the pile. The first platform is used for drying off.

The lodge is plastered with mud. During winter, the mud freezes and the lodge will have the consistency of

concrete, rendering it nearly indestructible. A small air hole is left near the top of the lodge.

The beaver population was once above 60 million in North America. After nearing extinction, the numbers have climbed back to around 12 million today. In areas like rocky Mountain National Park, the beaver only occupies around 10 percent of the suitable habitat.

Lack of adequate riparian plant life, such as willows, is one of the major reasons for the stagnation in beaver populations. Elk populations and cattle in riparian areas over the last century have led to increased grazing, which in turn harms the growth of these needed riparian plants.

In the 16th century, the pope decreed that, due to the scaly tail and aquatic lifestyle, the beaver was to be considered a fish. This decree meant that the beaver could be eaten during Catholic fasting days.

This is one Catholic boy who will find something else to eat on those fasting days. I prefer to keep my relationship with the Colorado native beaver on a more social nature, whereby I visit his ponds for fishing purposes. Let’s hope that is a long-term relationship, as I really enjoy his company when I am in the backcountry.

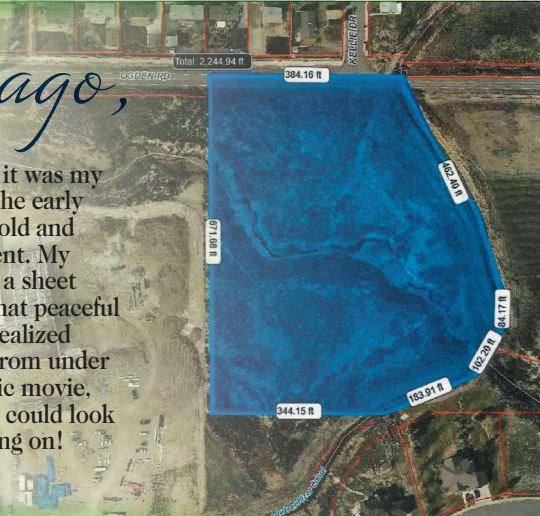
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*A few weeks ago,*

We were driving back from a trip to Ohio, and it was my turn to drive just east of Colby, KS. at dawn. The early morning light was shining on rolling fields of gold and green. It was a beautiful, peaceful, quiet moment. My husband was asleep in the passenger seat with a sheet pulled over his head to block the rising sun. That peaceful moment was destroyed by my giggles when I realized him sleeping there with a hand stretched out from under the sheet was like a scene from the cult classic movie, “Weekend at Bernie’s”! I bet the truckers who could look down in our car were wondering what was going on! Think about it...



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