



Urban Wildlife Issues  
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried  
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## May 2006 – Wildlife Column

I am very patriotic. I love beavers. Can't help myself - cutest critters around. Not everyone agrees. Many folk feel they are no more than "pesky aquatic rodents," and with just cause.

They are aquatic and they are rodents, and their master dam-building abilities can be very destructive. However, love is not rational, and I'm rooting for the beavers all the way.

Aside from being cute, they are pretty amazing animals. They are perfectly adapted to their underwater lifestyle. For starters, they can stay underwater for 15 minutes at a time. And get this: they can close their mouths behind their teeth when they are underwater.

They have a protective eye membrane to help them see underwater and ear flaps to protect their ears. The beaver secretes an oily substance called castoreum, which waterproofs its fur. And it has a thick layer of fat under the skin to insulate it from the cold water.

You would imagine that the beaver's feet are all webbed, but not so. Only its back feet are webbed. Its hands are similar to an otter's and quite dexterous. Its tail, too, is something of a marvel. It's a multipurpose tool acting as an organ for storing fat, a rudder and (when slapped on the water) an alarm system to alert other beavers of danger.

But, best of all, beavers are wonderful builders. They are the engineers of the North American wilderness. That's where the big teeth and dexterous hands come in useful. However, their very skill at dam building and their tendency to gnaw at trees has brought them into conflict with humans. Let's cut the beaver a little slack. Dam building is a survival strategy for them. And beaver dams do have their uses, over and above being home to beavers.

Beaver dams provide habitat for waterfowl and other aquatic animals, and they help reduce soil erosion and flooding. Flooding is less likely downstream of a dam because the water flow is less intense. We currently have a beaver in care at the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C.'s care centre in Burnaby. He or she was quite probably a resident in the UBC Endowment Lands. It was discovered on Jericho Beach.

The ocean is not a good place for a beaver to be, as salt is toxic to them. This one was near dead when it arrived. The salt had severely dehydrated the animal and its kidneys were shutting down because they were overloaded. The only cure is to flush them with fluids. Once it was strong enough, it was placed in a pool where it could drink.

Because the beaver had not eaten for several days and had ingested large quantities of salt water, the beneficial bacteria that normally inhabit its complex digestive tract were also not functioning properly. To help combat this problem, staff hand-fed the beaver yogurt several times a day to help restore the bacterial colony.

Our beaver is doing very well. It is walking more efficiently and, with luck, it will be released in a week or so. You may have noticed that I have not assigned gender to this beaver. That is because we are not sure if it's a boy or girl. The beaver has internalized genitalia, so it's hard to tell. We guess this beaver is about two years old and probably venturing out on its own for the first time. The youngsters (kits) typically remain with their parents until they're about two, when they are forced out of the colony to find a new territory and mate of their own. Beavers, incidentally, usually mate for life.

If you have a beaver near your home and it's damming streams and gnawing at your trees, you can protect property and the beaver. Wrap your trees with chain link fencing to a height of at least one metre, higher if flooding occurs. If you have an active dam, install a beaver culvert. Inserted into the centre of the dam or lodge, it will prevent excess flooding or water restriction. Live trapping and dam removal should only be a final resort, as beavers will often drown during the process.