

# Conservation Corner

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Last week an area farmer stopped by to inform us of some beaver damage along one of our wildlife areas. They had trapped five beavers in all and were wondering how to go about cleaning up their after-dinner mess. Time to "Leave It to Beaver" here in Conservation Corner.

The beaver, *Castor Canadensis*, is the largest rodent or chewing animal in North America. Adults weigh from 35 to 65 pounds and grow up to 4 feet in length. Beavers are semiaquatic and so their brown fur is oily and waterproof. And while their hind feet are webbed for swimming, their front feet are nimble and dexterous for digging and carrying materials. Beavers are powerful swimmers, able to shut their nose, ears, and transparent inner eyelids to stay underwater up to 15 minutes.



Beavers are herbivores and adults require one to two pounds of plant food each day. Their winter diet is 100 percent leaves, buds, and inner bark of woody plants. Their summer diet, on the other hand, is only 10 percent woody plants and 90 percent corn and water plants.

Beavers are one of the few rodents that mate for life. Each couple raises one litter of 3 to 4 kits per year. At birth beaver kits are fully furred with open eyes and weigh about one pound. Kits are weaned at six weeks and live at home for two years. Beavers may live up to 24 years in the wild.

Beavers raise their young in lodges constructed of branches and, in our area, cornstalks. Lodge-building requires deep water to keep out predators such as coyotes, otters, and mink as well as to prevent winter freezing. Beavers collect branches in the fall which they stick in the mud around their lodge, both to eat during the winter months but also to catch snow which helps insulate and keep the pond open.

The beaver was at the forefront of Western expansion and exploration when beaver pelt hats and coats were all the fashion in Europe and trappers traveled west in quest of beaver furs. Even though beaver populations at the time of settlement are estimated at 100-200 million, mountain men almost trapped the beaver to extinction. Like the buffalo, beavers have recovered, and today beaver fur is once again used to make coats and hats.

Beavers are a keystone species, second only to humans in their ability to manipulate and change the environment. We'll save that chapter of their story for next week.

Here in Pocahontas County, beavers seem to be increasing in number and may be found in many area streams and drainage ditches. And while beavers often favor willow or cottonwood trees, our beaver family was feasting on ash saplings and trees along the South Branch of Lizard Creek. Did you know it only takes about three minutes for a beaver to cut down a 5-inch diameter tree? Here's an idea – maybe these "eager beavers" could be trained to help with clean-up following the pending EAB invasion.