



OAKLAND
COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter



Nature's Best Dam Engineer!

Beavers are often referred to as nature's best dam engineers, a well-deserved title. Although not often seen because of their nocturnal lifestyle they are very much at home in Oakland County, sometimes thriving just a few hundred feet from busy roads. With those thoughts in mind, I quickly agreed last week to a request from my friend Lucy Clucas at Turtle Creek Farm in Waterford Township to share information about beavers with a visiting group. *FYI: Turtle Creek Farm is a private educational facility that is not open to the public for drop-in visits.*

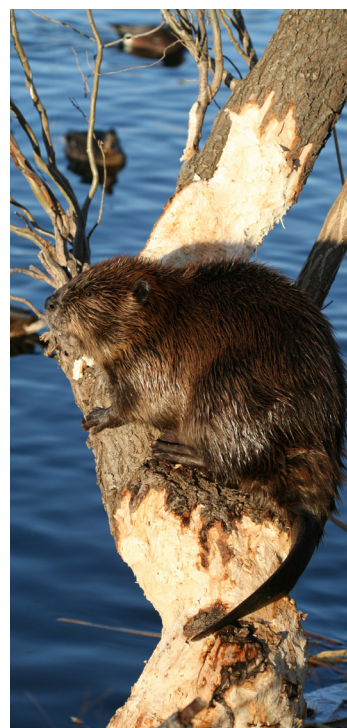
Turtle Creek has multiple trail cameras monitoring a beaver lodge on its property. Photos in this blog show images of beavers taken from those cameras. The other photos are from my farm visit last week.

Beavers are masterful at damming creeks, felling trees and building lodges. They are crepuscular creatures meaning they are most active from dusk to dawn but on occasion they may appear in daylight hours.

Beavers are semi-aquatic mammals and are the largest rodent of North America. Adult beavers usually weigh 45-60 pounds. They are well known for being nature's ultimate architects building structures that last.

The sharp teeth of beavers are used to fell trees used to build dams that create ponds and construct sturdy homes called lodges. Mud is included in their construction projects. The water surrounding the lodge gives them a layer of protection from such species as coyotes. The teeth also enable them to feast on the cambium layer of a variety of hardwood trees; as well as cutting branches into manageable size sections.

Beavers live in close-knit family groups, are strictly nocturnal, and known for their ability to topple trees, dig underwater canals, and build dams and lodges. They are looked at as a "keystone species"; which is a species that has a significant role in an ecosystem that usually benefits other species. When they build a dam, the nearby habitat and water levels change. Those changes almost always have a positive effect on other creatures. I recall seeing a goose nesting on top of a beaver lodge at Highland Oaks County Park many years ago and a few years ago a beaver felled trees on my property at the edge of a marsh. One tree that was heavily gnawed but never fell eventually became and remains a home for woodpeckers.



When beavers are about two years old, they are fully grown and set off on their own to find sites for a new home; which was the case for the appearance of the beaver lodge at Turtle Creek a few years ago. There is nothing haphazard about their planning and construction work and their site selection was ideal, being on private property.

Coinciding with the development of the foundation of the lodge is the creation of an underwater passageway that leads into the center of the lodge. The underwater entrance reduces the chances of exploration or threats from such creatures as coyotes; and bears where they are found well north of us. And of course it also protects from overly curious humans!

Tree felling can be risky behavior and there are documented cases of a tree coming down on beavers. Usually however, all goes well and the beaver steadily gnaws away while propping its self-up with its broad flat tail.

The beaver's tail also propels them through aquatic habitats. When sensing danger, a beaver will slap its tail sharply against the water, something I once saw and heard at Florence Lake on Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore's South Manitou Island. The danger sensed by the beaver was my not so stealthy approach to the edge of the shore.

Another unique feature of beavers is a second set of eyelids known as a nictitating membrane; that acts like built in swim goggles! Their ears and nose can close while underwater - they can remain under water without coming up for air for up to 15 minutes.

Their large incisors continuously grow but are kept at length by the near constant gnawing action to fell trees and cut them into manageable sections. Webbed hind feet serve to complement its extraordinary swimming ability. If I was to be asked what is one of the coolest creatures to be found in Oakland County my answer would quickly be beavers!

Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.

