

THE FOLLY OF THE BEAVER

by HAROLD E. HOBDEN*

Beavers, too, can err in judgement. So it would appear from some unique beaver-work, the like of which I have never seen in all my years spent in the woods.

I own a couple of miles of canyon on the Little Clear River, what I call my private game sanctuary. This is north of the Peace River and just within Alberta, east of Fort St. John, B.C. The beavers multiply and migrate from there. I find they make the best of company — and no finer relaxation can I wish for than watching them in late evening or on a rainy day when work can be put off, allowing time for a hike.

To my surprise, the beavers started a damming and falling project in a most unfavourable location — 5 miles from the nearest stream. The timber supply was exceptionally heavy — mostly white poplars 60 to 70 feet in height with diameters of 12 to 24 inches. These were felled to a depth of 5 feet in places. The beaver dam, if completed, would have to be at least 80 rods (1,320 feet) long. It could have retained water to a depth of 6 feet, *if there had been any*, and backed it up for a half a mile. No water was dammed up and I could see no sign of their constructing a lodge.



* Box 402,
Elk Point, Alberta.

I decided this was worth a few snapshots, but could not include all the stumps in one picture. So I hired a man with a power-saw to cut a heater-block length off of each stump and I packed these to the gravel road. Then I hauled them to my house on the big trail shown here. When people ask what the objects are, I tell them "Peace River cabbages."

I suspect that this fall some road-side hunters saw where the beavers had dragged the tips of some of the fallen trees to the gravel road; their attention thus drawn to the beavers' activities they killed them off.



Another picture demonstrates that beavers, too, have fallers accidents; the tree slipped off the stump gnawed by the beaver. The lower end of the tree pinned the beaver's hind leg to the earth, while the tree remained upright, lodged against its neighbors.

MAN PLAYS WITH THE QU'APPELLE WILDLIFE DIES

by KEN L. EARL*

A trapper who is not a conservationist does not remain a trapper very long. As a part-time trapper, I am very interested in all aspects of wildlife and conservation here in the Qu'Appelle Valley. I believe that with some forethought, man could have an agricultural and recreational areas partnership with nature, but to date

am greatly concerned with the evident disregard for wildlife and its habitat.

As recently as 25 years ago, the Qu'Appelle River was clear enough to see the bottom — and to swim in. The banks had little erosion and seedlings grew in profusion along the river bank. In the mid-1950's, a family born and raised on the river bank began to notice the first effects of water fluctuations and flushing resulting from man-made dams. At times, there was not enough water in the Qu'Appelle to supply irrigation water — yet, suddenly, 3 weeks later, great amounts of water were let loose down the river. The effect on the aquatic mammals and plant life has been devastating. Such rises in level may also flood eggs and kill nestlings of ground-nesting birds near the river.

The government engineers appear to be totally ignorant of beavers and muskrats in particular. In the Qu'Appelle Valley, these animals tunnel into the bank. In late September and October, there is feverish activity by both species to gather the winter's store of food. Muskrats will be seen swimming with mouthfuls of grasses and then disappear — to stockpile them in the bank. Beavers construct what is known as a feedpile, usually within 10 to 20 feet of their main bank burrow. After the ice forms, these food caches are the only supplies available to both species.

Winter, then, is the worst possible time for sudden changes in water level. Beaver and muskrat residence burrows may be flooded and their food supplies washed down stream. I have seen water levels rise by 3 to 5 feet in as many days with a flush of water released from the Aiktow Dam. The hydrostatic pressure lifts the thick ice and any feedpiles frozen in it are washed away. Sometimes the food is carried beyond the reach of the beavers and they are condemned to starvation under the ice. A classic example of this occurred near the Kennell Anglican Church, 4 miles east of Craven, in late February, 1973.

When a sudden flushing of water of this type occurred in November, 1972.

I angrily phoned the Saskatchewan Department of the Environment. A member of their Commission accused me of being selfishly interested in possible loss of my traps rather than in the environment — and I was told that tampering with water levels was only on an experimental basis for the last 3 years. However, it has been going on much longer than that.

Beavers build dams on the Qu'Appelle when this is necessary to maintain a reasonable supply of water. Two years ago, government engineers blasted the beaver dams all the way from Craven to the Piapot Indian reserve, a distance of about 13 miles. This was supposedly to clear the channel but, again, indicates a lack of understanding of nature. I know of no case where a beaver dam flooded land between Craven and Highway No. 6 — and the construction of some of these dams was simply the animals' response to the engineers' manipulations: dams are made necessary because bank tunnels were no longer secure. If the engineers do not understand nature, they should ask for help from biologists, rather than compounding their own errors.

Finally, the quality of water coming down Wascana Creek from Regina is so rank with inadequately treated sewage and so high in phosphates and other nutrients that the death of aquatic plants and seedlings is evident as soon as the water recedes. The whole matter of environment quality in the Qu'Appelle Valley deserves immediate attention. Even rapid implementation of the survey recommendations would be another case of "too little and too late."

* Lumsden, Saskatchewan.