

The Beaver



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Introduction

The beaver is the second largest living rodent, the largest being the capybara a kind of big guinea pig from South America. Rodents are a group of animals that includes almost half of all species of animals, including hamsters, guinea pigs, rats and squirrels.

There are two types of beaver, the American Beaver or *Castor Canadensis* which is found in parts of North America and Canada and the European Beaver or *Castor Fiber* which is found in parts of Europe including Scandinavia and Eastern Europe.

Beavers in the British Isles

Beavers were found in the wild in the British Isles up until about the twelfth century when they were hunted to extinction. Beavers have been found in captivity in our zoos for many years. Recently, however the beaver is being reintroduced into the wild in Scotland and in the South West.

The Beaver

The beaver is mainly nocturnal and will rarely travel more than 100 metres from water. Beavers are brown with waterproof fur which is long and oily. They have 2 prominent front teeth which are orange and continue to grow throughout the beaver's life. The front feet are strong but very small and similar to human hands and used for gripping things. The back feet are webbed and help the beaver to swimming. The tail is covered in tough scales and is used as a rudder and also to signal danger by slapping water. An adult beaver weighs between 18 and 20 kilograms, and can be up to 100 cm in length plus 30 –40 cm of tail.

Beavers live between 7 and 8 years but can live up to 25 years old particularly in captivity.

Beavers are herbivores and live on plants, leaves, and fresh bark from deciduous trees in the summer and bark of branches stored under water during the winter. Beavers eat the bark and leaves of aspen, birch, willow, wild cherry and poplar.

Beaver Skills

The beaver is an exciting animal to watch because it is a compact self-sufficient busy little creature. It is capable of many engineering feats which man acknowledges as being ingenious and a remarkable example of instinct. It is very good at adapting their surroundings to suit their needs.

The beaver uses their teeth for gnawing wood and can fell trees up to one metre in diameter but prefer trees that are less than 10cm in diameter.

When the beaver swims under water it can close its mouth, nose, and ears to keep the water out and remain submerged for several minutes. Its lips can be closed behind its incisor teeth to enable it to gnaw under water and build up its home. On land the beaver is capable of walking on its hind legs and carrying logs, mud or stones in its front paws. The beaver also has an excellent sense of hearing and smell. It is a very capable creature.

Where the Beaver Lives

The European Beaver prefers to live in burrows in riverbanks but will build lodges out of piles of logs places called lodges where it is not possible to burrow into the riverbank. The American Beaver will build more dams which are built of tree trunks, branches and mud.

It cuts down logs in spring and early summer, letting the logs lie until the autumn when it builds or repairs its home. The beaver lives in a lodge - a mound of sticks, moss and stones with a domed roof plastered with mud. A lodge looks like a giant hedgehog with wooden prickles. The beaver lodge can be found on the bank of a stream, at the end of a dam or on a pile of logs, which are placed at the bottom of the river.

A lodge has a dry upper chamber with a vertical air vent where the beaver lives and a store where supplies of food are kept, weighed down in the water with mud. The lodge has two entrances, both of which are under water.

One entrance is narrow and steep and used as the main entrance to the lodge, the other entrance, being wider and less steep, is used to transport food into the lodge from the store. Because both entrances to the lodge need to be submerged, the beaver will first construct a dam to raise the water level in the pond where his home is to be built. The dam can be of any length, sometimes even 100 metres long. The beaver gnaws down trees for its dam and drags or carries the logs to the water's edge. At times it builds channels to float the logs to the pond. In constructing the dam, the beaver weaves the logs together and then, using its front paws and flat tail, packs mud into the cracks to ensure that the dam becomes watertight. The dam is constructed to ensure that, although the water might freeze on the top of the pond, it never freezes at the depth of the entrances to the lodge. The beaver can therefore survive a harsh winter in his lodge, while the ice and snow lie thick on the surface of the land and water.

A beaver does not live alone in a lodge. At times a lodge might contain twelve beavers or more, all working and living together. Beavers are cheerful creatures and enjoy each other's company. To greet another beaver, a beaver will slap its tail on the water as a sign of welcome, although under different circumstances this signal indicates danger. The beaver is a naturally clean creature. It cleans its lodge and itself regularly. The beaver combs and cleans its fur using its claws and teeth and helps other beavers clean themselves too.

Beaver Young

Beavers will give birth to one litter a year of 2 or 3 babies called kits. Kits are born with fur and their eyes open in the lodge. At four days the kits can swim, and within two months the kits are weaned from the mother's milk and have strong enough teeth to eat bark, roots, leaves, and berries like their parents. A beaver will remain with its parents for two years and then leaves its home to find a mate and build its own lodge and dam.

Enemies

The animals that hunt beavers include the fox, the wolf, the bear, the lynx, and the wolverine. These animals are not water creatures and so the beaver is safe in his lodge providing the pond does not freeze up and give these animals access to the lodge. However, another enemy of the beaver is the otter, which is capable of swimming into the lodge and attacking the beavers. Fortunately, the lodge has two entrances and the beavers can swim out of the opposite entrance and escape.

A further enemy of the beaver used to be man. Man hunted the beaver for its fur and teeth and the beaver almost became extinct. The fur was used to make hats and coats and the teeth to make sharp chisels or knives. The castor was also collected and made into perfumes. Today the beaver is a protected species and its numbers are increasing.

Beavers have to be very careful to avoid enemies. While the beaver is working outside the lodge it is prey to many animals. Its distinctive smell, from a pouch in its upper tail, which contains castor - a musky smelling substance - leaves scent marks as it works. If in danger while above the ground, the beaver can dig plunge-holes in the ground to hide in.

Fortunately the kits do not have the distinctive castor for enemies to smell. The teeth of the beaver also provide formidable weapons if necessary.

When a beaver senses danger, it slaps its tail on the water or ground to warn the others to return to the safety of their lodge. Their home is the beaver's best fortress.