

# BEAVER

(*Castor canadensis*)

Rodent Family/**Herbivore\***



NPS Photos



Beavers are **semi-aquatic** and the world's second largest rodents.

They are best known for their natural trait of building dams in rivers and streams, and building their homes (known as beaver lodges) in the resulting pond. Beavers cause habitat changes in two ways; by

cutting down trees and by construction of the dam. The dam is built from sticks and branches that are dragged to the site, piled and interwoven, and sealed with mud and stones. The beaver cuts down an average of 216 trees a year. It can chop down trees up to 40 cm in diameter. This **instinctive** activity happens wherever beavers are motivated to build by the sound of running water.



Beavers mate for life and only take another mate if the first dies. Beaver colonies contain from 2 to 12 members, with one breeding pair and a number of **yearlings** and **kits**. Young may leave the family colony by age one, or may be gradually forced out by the parent pair, if they have not left by the age of two.

**Special features:** The beaver's tail has important uses both in the water and on land. In the water, the animal uses its tail as a 4-way rudder. On land, the tail supports the beaver when it is sitting or standing upright and is a counterbalance when the animal is carrying materials with its front paws. When they sense danger, beavers slap the water with their tails, making a noise like a pistol shot. This danger warning to other beavers may also serve to drive away potential predators.

Since beaver's teeth are constantly growing, they gnaw on the bark of trees to keep their teeth worn down and grind their teeth to keep them sharp.

Beavers can stay submerged for up to 15 minutes. They have transparent eyelids that cover their eyes when they go under water. This helps them to see well and

protects their eyeballs from particles suspended in the water. Their ears and noses have valves that stop water from entering when they submerge. A flap closes behind their front teeth preventing water from going into their mouth when they chew sticks underwater.

Adults weigh between 18 and 22 kg and, including its 30 cm tail, a large beaver may measure 1.3 metres long.

Beavers have two oil **glands** on their lower bellies that produce a waterproof oil. Beavers comb this into their fur using a specialized split toenail on their webbed hind feet. They also have two castor **glands** which produce a scent that beavers deposit on **scent mounds** to mark territorial boundaries.

**Food:** Bark of trembling aspen tree (white poplar), willows, birch and black poplar, roots, pond lilies and other aquatic plants.

**Denning:** Beavers inhabit lodges or houses constructed from mud and sticks. These rise above the water either in the centre of the ponds or against the banks of waterways. Lodges provide protection from predators and keep the colony warm in winter. They have underwater entrances and an unmuddied spot directly on top, which serves as an air vent. During winter, beaver activity is restricted to traveling under the ice between the lodge and their underwater food **cache**.



Beavers may spend as long as 6 months under the ice.

**Predators:** The beaver's major predators are wolves. Bears, wolverines, lynx and coyotes will also occasionally prey.

\*Words in bold are explained in the Glossary on page 32.

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## Distribution:

All Provinces and Territories

## Maturity:

20 months

## Average life span:

4 to 5 years

## Mating:

January/March

## Young born:

May/June

## Gestation:

103 to 107 days

1 litter a year/Average 3 or 4 kits

## Habitat:

Slow, winding streams and small lakes with soft banks where willows, aspen and other **deciduous** trees grow.

## Management Issues:

Beaver dams can cause dangerous flooding damage to roads, railways, homes, and agricultural lands.

Overabundant populations increase the risk of water-borne diseases such as **Giardia**. Beavers can both create and destroy habitat important for certain species at risk.

