

The Beaver



The beaver was now two years old. She was one of the eldest of a large family of beavers who lived together in a lodge made of mud and sticks. There were ten of them in all: father and mother, four three-week old kits, three one-year olds, and the eldest female. Her brothers of the same age had already left the lodge to live on their own. Now it was her turn to go. None of the others noticed as she swam to the bank.

It was a warm evening in early summer. The beaver sniffed the pine-scented air and cut a small branch from a felled aspen tree that had been left lying on the bank. As she chewed its soft bark, she looked back across the pond. On the other side, her father and the older kits were hard at work. One was gnawing at the trunk of a polar, one was trimming a felled tree, one was hauling logs to the water. Her father was using the logs to enlarge the dam that he and his mate had started ten years before.

The beaver watched them for a while. But she did not join them in their work as she had always done before. Instead, she turned and walked away into the forest.

The forest was darker than the river bank and strange noises came suddenly from the rustling trees. Owls hooted and coyotes howled. The frightened beaver could see almost nothing to start with. Then she saw a light glinting ahead of her. It was the fierce golden eyes of a lynx glowing in the darkness. The beaver froze. She was too far from the water to dive for safety. She could only wait for the cat to pass by. It came closer, but it could neither smell her nor see her dark shape. It yawned, licked itself, then padded away, silently, on its huge furry paws.

As soon as the beast had gone, the beaver hurried back to the river bank. From then on she stayed within a safe distance of the water.

Night after night, the young beaver wandered along by the stream. She slept by day in any safe hollow she could find. But in time she grew weary of walking and found a place where she could stay. It was perfect: a grove of maple, alder, aspen and willow, by a bend in the river. She spent the day sleeping in a hole under the roots of an elder. Then, that same night, she laid claim to the river bank and to the fine trees that grew there. She put her scent on heaps of mud and stones, and anywhere else that an animal would sniff. Any other beavers would know now that it was her home.

The very next night, she started to mark all the scent posts again. After a while she noticed a new scent. It was a good smell, but she could neither hear nor see anything to go with it. Then suddenly she saw a movement and heard a splash. She waddled down to the water and looked about. There, surfacing in the dim light, was a young male beaver. He had smelt her scent.

He clambered out of the water and came towards her. She took in his warm smell and nuzzled up to his fur. She had been on her own for too long. It was time for her to have a mate. Soon the two were kissing and cuddling, combing each other's fur.

When morning came, the beaver took her new mate back to the hollow beneath the alder. There was just room enough for two. They snuggled up together and went to sleep.

Soon the days grew shorter. The leaves on the trees turned from green to gold, and then to scarlet. Before the leaves fell, the beavers would have to build a proper home. They had known how to cut and carry logs since they were born. And they were expert builders. One evening they set about damming the stream. Balancing on her tail, the female cut a notch in a poplar tree with her sharp front teeth. Then she chiselled and gnawed all round the trunk. She tore out the wood chips with her teeth.

At last she heard the fibres of the tree crack. She made a dash for the water as the tall poplar crashed to the ground, its branches tearing through other trees. Her mate, who was working on a nearby birch, only just managed to get out of the way.

The female then cut the larger branches from the fallen tree, stopping only to get out of the way when her mate's birch fell. Once the branches were off, the female cut the timber into shorter lengths. Then she tugged and pulled the pieces down to the water. Her mate did the same with his branches.

The beavers started dam building by pushing the larger branches into the muddy bed of the stream. They drove these first stakes in firmly so that the flowing water could not wash them away. Next they wove smaller logs, branches and twigs across, wedging them in tightly. They stuffed the gaps with mud and stones, which they clasped in armfuls to their chests. They piled up evermore twigs and brush for strength, and plastered them with more and more mud to make the dam watertight.

Slowly the water level began to rise. The beavers had dammed the stream and made a pool. Now they could make a lodge.

The water behind the dam had flooded the banks of the stream. The beavers were up to their waists in water as they cut the wood for their lodge. They started the lodge by making a solid mound of mud and branches in the middle of the pond. After many days, it stood more than a metre out of the water.

Then the beavers began to tunnel into the mound from under the water. When their two tunnels reached the part of the mound above the water level, they hollowed out a big hole. They lined the floor with mud and made a bed of shredded wood chips. Then they plastered mud over most of the roof, but left a good-sized gap with no plaster between the branches. This would allow in air for them to breathe when they moved in. There was only one more thing to be done.

All through autumn, there had been plenty of food in the forest and the animals had grown fat. Their fat would help to keep them warm in the winter. But, unless they went to sleep, they could not live only on their fat. They would need fresh food as well. The mice, squirrels and chipmunks collected stores of nuts and berries. The beavers collected wood. When the pond was frozen over, they would not be able to reach the forest. So they gathered a pile of branches and twigs and stuck them firmly in the bed of the pond near the lodge. Now all was ready.

SPaG Questions:

1. ***The beaver sniffed the pine-scented air and cut a small branch from a felled aspen tree that had been left lying on the bank.*** Which two words are synonyms?
2. ***It was perfect: a grove of maple, alder, aspen and willow, by a bend in the river.***
What is the name of the piece of punctuation used between the words ***perfect*** and ***a***? What job is it doing here?
3. **The beavers had dammed the stream and made a pool.** What tense are the words had dammed?
4. **After many days, it stood more than a metre out of the water.** What name is given to the underlined part of this sentence?
5. ***Their fat would help to keep them warm in the winter.*** Which is the modal verb in this sentence?

Comprehension Questions:

1. What is the name given to the structure that beavers build and live in?
2. ***None of the others noticed as she swam to the bank.*** How does the author want the reader to feel at this point?
3. Look at the paragraph that begins, ***It was a warm evening in early summer.*** Find three pieces of evidence that the beaver family are 'hard at work'.
4. Look at the paragraph that begins, ***Soon the days grew shorter.*** What time of year is it now in the story? How do you know?
5. ***Now all was ready.*** What do you think will happen next?