

Beaver Desperation

By Larry Hyslop



Aspens in Lamoille Canyon chewed off by beavers

The above photo contains an important story regarding the wellbeing of beavers in Lamoille Canyon. The trees have been chewed off by beavers, but these beavers were not five-feet tall. These chew marks so high off the ground tell a tale of beaver desperation.

Beavers do not build dams to create lovely ponds for our enjoyment, nor do they build ponds to improve fishing. They also do not build dams to improve the riparian conditions along Nevada streams, although they certainly accomplish that task. They build dams for protection against predators.

Their house, or lodge, is built in the center of a protective moat. Since the house has only underwater entrances, predators would have to dive beneath the water to enter the house. It would also be quite a feat for a predator to dig into the house from above and during this long and arduous process, the beavers would have lots of time to simply swim out and watch the predators from the safety of the pond. Predators might try to chase a beaver swimming across the pond but when the predator gets close, the beaver simply slaps its tail and disappears underwater to re-surface far across the pond.

The only time beavers are vulnerable is when they leave the water. Their forays across dry ground to reach food are made at night and beavers are very cautious as they chew through tree trunks and drag limbs back to the pond. They often dig canals away from the main pond so they can stay in water that much longer.

The pond also provides winter food storage. During the latter part of summer and during fall, beavers work hard retrieving aspen and willow limbs which are pulled to the pond bottom and anchored with mud and rocks. This task is vital to beavers, ensuing they store enough food to last the winter.

Winter is generally a good time for beavers, which do not hibernate. The pond is covered with ice and when they become hungry, beavers simply swim out of their house and through the pond beneath the ice. They pull free one of the stored limbs and drag it back to the house, while completely protected from predators. Inside the warm house, they dry off and eat the cambium layer of the limb's bark, along with the small twigs and any remaining leaves. During a good winter, beavers face no predator threat at all.

However, if their stored food supply runs out before the ice melts, they are in trouble. They must leave the pond's safety and plod across the snow to cut down and retrieve nearby food.

In the above photo, the aspens have been chewed off above the height of last winter's snow. One or more beavers, probably from the nearest upstream beaver ponds, was forced to attempt a dangerous trek to retrieve needed food. Several trees were cut down so this trek was probably repeated several

times. There is no way of knowing if this beaver survived the winter, but the nearby beaver ponds appear active. Whatever happened, it was definitely an act of beaver desperation.

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 9/21/2012
© Gray Jay Press, Elko, NV

Return to [Elko Nature Notes](#)