

How to make a Beaver Hat



Beavers

The beaver is probably the most famous Canadian animal of all, a creature whose energy and ingenuity have made it synonymous with effective hard work. "To beaver away" is a perfectly legitimate expression dignified by inclusion in the Oxford Dictionary.

Ten thousand years ago they grew as big as bears, nine foot long and weighing up to 800 pounds. Today's animal is doing well to reach 100 pounds. Although indiscriminate trapping in former times once threatened his

"If the pig had his rights he would be our national emblem, instead of the beaver. What has the beaver done for us anyway? The pig, on the other hand, sustained our fathers in the fight against the wilderness and yet his name is a name of scorn."

—Peter McArthur, "In pastures green," 1915

survival, recent conservation programmes have long since restored him to prosperity. Beavers are alive and well and living all over Canada, except in the Arctic and on some offshore islands.

Inroads on the beaver population began in the early seventeenth century, after it was discovered that beaver pelts made extremely elegant hats. At the peak of the beaver trade 170,000 pelts a year were sold in London and Edinburgh. The advent of the silk top hat knocked the bottom out of the business however, and now that hardly anyone wears hats anyway, beaver is used mainly in fur coats. Beaver pelts are a profitable Canadian export, but the business is now so strictly controlled that the problem is not how to protect the beaver population but how to harvest enough to prevent over-population and resultant starvation due to exhaustion of food supplies.

Beaver are chunky, stocky creatures on dry land but graceful in water, where their long flat tails help to propel them at about two or three m.p.h. on or below the surface.

They are best known for their dam-building, the purpose of which is to surround their house with protective water and to form a pool so deep that there is always some unfrozen water under the winter ice for swimming in. Dams can be as high as or higher than six feet and as long as 50 yards. The beaver's lodge in the centre of the pond may be his home for many years. It is built on a base of sunken poles and is six to nine feet high with a diameter of ten to twenty feet.

The centre chamber has a sloping floor of dry, shredded willow bark. A beaver family has ten to twelve members—the adult pair, kits and yearlings of the previous year. Now that man has been subdued, beavers' most dangerous enemies are otters, which can enter the lodge via its underwater door and attack them inside.

The beaver has long been one of Canada's national symbols. When Max Aitken, one of Canada's more famous exports, was elevated to the peerage in Britain, he took the title Lord Beaverbrook and was generally and affectionately referred to as 'the Beaver'.

"His shape is thicke and short, having likewise short legs, feet like a mole before, and behind like a goos, and a broad tayle in forme like a shoo-soale, very tough and strong; his head is something like an Otter's head, saving that his teeth before, be placed like the teeth of a Rabbit, two above and two beneath, sharpe and broad with which he cuts down trees as thick as man's thigh."

—An early writer named Wood, describing the beaver