

BEAVERS AT IVY CREEK

Created for use by the Ivy Creek Foundation

If you are really lucky and look very carefully you might see a beaver at Ivy Creek. Beavers are large rodents that are semi-aquatic, meaning that they live both on land and in water. They have really thick waterproof fur, as well as noses and ears that close in the water. They have transparent eyelids that help them see underwater, kind of like swimming goggles! They even have webbed feet! But the most striking thing about a beaver is its tail. It's flat, almost hairless, and acts as a rudder, meaning it helps the beaver steer through the water. Its tail also helps the beaver keep its balance when it's eating tree bark. A beaver will use its tail to slap the water to alert other beavers of danger.



It has been said that with the exception of humans, the beaver is responsible for the biggest impact on an ecosystem (a community of interacting animals and plants and their environment). Beavers can dam a stream to create a pool of water sometimes as big as a lake. The dam blocks the stream so that the water backs up. It introduces an entirely new ecosystem with lots of different animals and plants. The wetlands that often result from a beaver dam provide homes and food for lots of other woodland animals like herons, ducks, turtles, dragonflies, and more. The largest beaver dam in the world is in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada ...over ½ mile long! That's a lot of trees!

How do beavers construct dams and lodges? First, they select trees for specific purposes. For instance, if they need a base for a new lodge they will cut down a larger tree and drag it under the water to begin construction. Then they use smaller trees and branches to build up the dam or lodge. Finally, they use those incredible tails to pat mud on them to fill in gaps. When the mud dries, their building is waterproof! Their ambitious building talents can often result in the destruction of large areas of trees. Although this activity is usually tolerated in the forest, it can be devastating for homeowners.



How do they cut down trees? With their very powerful teeth! As with all rodents, beavers must use their teeth to gnaw....or the teeth just keep growing. If the teeth keep growing, they will eventually start to curl and get really long so that the beaver would not be able to eat. This is the case for all rodents including mice, rats, squirrels, hamsters, and more. They all have to gnaw.

Beavers are very social. They live in large family groups with the parents, kits (baby beavers), and older brothers and sisters in the lodges they build together. These beaver lodges look like piles of sticks from the outside, but they are amazing! They are built in the middle of the water so that predators (hunters) can't reach them. They have secret entrances and exits under water, again so that nothing can catch them and eat them. Beaver lodges sometimes even have two rooms, one in which to dry and the other in which to sleep. They even plant something like a garden where beavers store their food for the winter. They "plant" green trees and branches at the bottom of the water by sticking them in mud. So when a beaver gets the munchies in the middle of winter they can swim through one of their tunnels and dive down to their stored food. Even if the water is iced over they have a fresh supply to keep them well fed. Beavers don't hibernate (sleep through the winter) but they do sleep a lot during the winter. They are nocturnal, meaning that they are most active at night.



BEAVER ACTIVITIES

1. Hike the Red Trail in Ivy Creek. This lovely trail will take you to the creek and beyond. Spend some time near the little bridge across the creek. If the weather permits and the river is low enough to be safe, you can wade a bit in the water. You won't see beavers in this shallow section but it's fun to look for other animals. Cross the little bridge and continue on the trail where you will walk along the creek even further. This is where you might see beaver activity.... If you're lucky!

This trail intersects another trail along the wider part of the creek, the Peninsula Trail. Again, look for beaver activity. But don't limit yourself to beavers. There might be different water birds, turtles, snakes, frogs, and lot of insects and other animals.

You may not see beavers but sometimes you can see the result of their work. Look for stubby tree stumps with pointed tops. They almost look like really big pencils! These are what's left after a beaver cuts a tree down for its dam or lodge.

Pretend you're a beaver and make a beaver dam! Take a long narrow piece of tin foil or plastic and stretch it out like a stream down a low hill. Gather sticks, leaves, stones, and other natural things and stack them to try to prevent water from getting through. Take a pitcher or hose and slowly pour water down your "stream" and see if it gets through. If it does get through, try adding mud or even playdough to block the water.



BOOKS YOU MIGHT LIKE

Beavers: the Superpower Field Guide by Rachel Poliquin. Everything you wanted to know about beavers in a super fun format. This will especially appeal to older kids but will be fun to read for adults with preschoolers. This is the way science should be taught to children!

Beavers by Moira Rose Donohue. A photographic book that will appeal to everyone. Great nature photography.

Beavers by Gail Gibbons. A picture book by the beloved author of lots of educational children's books. She knows how to appeal to children.