

Beaver in the Applegate

BY JAKOB SHOCKEY

In 1826 - 27, a Canadian fur trapper named Peter Skene Ogden became the first white explorer to document the valleys of southwestern Oregon when Ogden was appointed by Hudson's Bay Company to lead a series of mass beaver-trapping expeditions, called the Snake River Expeditions. The goal was to leave no live beaver behind. The British Hudson's Bay Company was firmly established north of the Columbia River, but they were concerned about American trappers moving up the coast into what is present-day Oregon. To buffer themselves from the encroachment of these American frontiersmen, the Hudson's Bay Company resolved to create a "fur-desert" across the landscape south of the Columbia River.

Upon reaching the area of present-day Ashland, Peter Ogden was surprised to find beaver were already being hunted for meat by the local Shasta tribe. This was distressing to Ogden, for the Shasta roasted the beaver whole and allowed their valuable fur to burn away in the process. As his trappers went to work in the Rogue Valley, Ogden noted that six in every ten beavers they killed were scarred with old arrow and spear wounds. As he traversed this novel landscape, Ogden's focus on the extirpation of beaver was indefatigable. Upon encountering war between the tribes near present-day Klamath Falls, Ogden wrote "they may destroy each other, the more the better; if they are fond of war, let them enjoy it and we in the [meantime] will endeavor to wage war with their beaver."

Beavers are the only animal, next to the human, that can engineer dramatic change to their surrounding landscape and ecosystem. They are strict herbivores and eat leaves, twigs and the cambium bark layer from the trees they fell. Their dams back up water and create wetland ponds from which they can escape from predators and keep their vegetation cuttings fresh. They will either den in stream banks or construct lodges within their ponds, and

they will often disguise the entrance tunnel beneath the water's surface. They mate for life and have tight family units in which the mother is primarily responsible for maintaining the dam, lodge and food stores, while the father and older siblings are largely responsible for raising young.

When beavers move into an area of a stream and begin damming, the riparian ecosystem quickly changes. Water begins to back up against their dams, slowing the water's velocity and allowing more water to seep into the local water table. With this increased groundwater, streamside vegetation multiplies (despite the trees felled by beavers) and ground-cooled water begins upwelling back into the creek. These cool and often shaded pools become invaluable habitat for salmon and other fish. Suspended sediment and nutrients settle out of the slowed water and are deposited behind the beaver dams and around the surrounding vegetation.

The long-term effects of these beaver ecosystems are considerable and have been gaining more attention across the country in recent years. Due to elevated water tables, streams with beaver dams have consistently more water during the dry summer months and seasonal streams have been returned to year-round flow with the addition of beavers. Ranchers, land managers and municipalities are using the practice of reintroduction as a valid tool for water catchment across the west.

The sequestered water and vegetation complexity that beaver ecosystems create also has a striking effect upon fish and wildlife. Salmon populations expand, bringing marine nitrogen into our

landscape as their carcasses are hauled away by scavengers. Bird diversity and wild ungulate populations also flourish off this beaver habitat. That's why organizations like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Ducks Unlimited have funded efforts to reintroduce beavers.

However, these same effects can come in direct conflict with people and property because the best habitat is in the low-gradient streams along the valley floor, which is also often prime real estate, pasture and agricultural land. Beavers will fell unprotected ornamental and fruit trees, and their wetland expansion efforts can flood cropland, backyards and

Cowcreek Band of Umpqua Indians and the Beaver Advocacy Committee of the South Umpqua Rural Community Partnership (SURCP) hosted the third international State of the Beaver Conference. For three days people from many walks of life (from scientists to trappers) converged to share research projects, stories, and a passion for the beaver and what it does for our water and land. Across North America, people, towns and watershed councils have rallied around the reintroduction of this species into its native habitat. There were many technical presentations on mapping suitable beaver habitat or counting how many more salmon fry survive in beaver-

influenced streams, but the greater message of this conference was simple: If we leave them alone, beavers are capable of doing things with our waterways from which people, salmon and the rest of our ecosystem benefit.

Before Peter Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company, this area was thick with beavers and the beneficial effects they had upon the landscape. The water of free-flowing creeks like Thompson, Williams and Sterling would have



Beavers are strict herbivores and eat leaves, twigs and the cambium bark layer from the trees they fell. Photo: <http://commons.wikimedia.org>.

pasture. Also, like a hole in a very long dam, beavers often find plugging roadway culverts to be an irresistible opportunity for creating a pond. Fortunately, to outsmart a beaver you have to be only slightly smarter than a beaver, and there are practical and inexpensive solutions to these problems. Tree trunks can be wrapped in chicken wire, and road or pond culverts can be protected with various do-it-yourself "beaver deceivers" that have been developed in recent years. However, living with beavers in our waterways also requires a willingness to acknowledge their place in this valley and the benefit of the positive changes they bring to our creeks.

In Canyonville this January, the

moved sluggishly from one beaver pond to the next in a successional chain of wetland to the Applegate River. Today, beavers and their ponds have faded from these creeks and the Applegate Valley. However, fragmented colonies still live scattered at higher elevations and along riverbanks. Someday, we may again see their dams and lodges in southwest Oregon. I hope that we can be grateful for their work and respect their place in this valley.

For more information on designing and installing a beaver deceiver, contact me or check out *The Best Beaver Management Practices* DVD at the Applegate Library.

Jakob Shockey
jakob.shockey@mac.com

— Consider a pet trust —

Most people remember the story of hotel heiress Leona Helmsley, who left 12-million dollars to her Maltese dog, Trouble. Because of death threats, the dog had its own security at a cost of \$100,000 per year!

While most of us do not have those resources to commit, responsible pet owners do want to make sure that, in the

event of their death, their pets are cared for. Many assume that they can leave a portion of their estate to their pet in a will, but this is not allowed under Oregon law. Oregon law does, however, allow the creation of a pet trust. In creating the trust, the pet owner names a trustworthy caregiver as the animal's recipient and leaves a sum of money to provide for the animal's care.

Pet owners creating a pet trust should ensure that the designated caregiver will be committed to the long-term care of the animal, and the trust should be drafted to include specific instructions on how the funds should be applied toward that care.

The Oregon Humane Society (OHS) offers a related program called "Friends Forever," which houses surviving pets when

OHS is named in a planned gift.

Make sure to consider how to provide for your pets in the event that they survive you. If you wish to memorialize this arrangement in your estate planning documents, it is good to have an attorney review any written declaration.

Alissa M. Weaver
541-890-0147

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