

Beaver Habitat, Lodges, and Dams
Article from Jan - Feb 2008 Buckeye Trapper
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Did you ever ask yourself what happens to a beaver's dams and houses after you catch them? Been there and seen that many, many times. Several things may happen. First, if you fail to remove every beaver from a specific colony, the remaining one, or ones, will continue to perform maintenance and upkeep on the dam and house. You'll know they're there because the dam and house will show it. Beavers do not hide their presence. It's easy to tell by the fresh sticks and mud they place on dams to patch low spots. Kick a hole in the dam and it will be patched overnight, unless things are frozen.

When you remove all the resident beavers from their location and don't destroy their dams and lodges, you're inviting others to move in and replace them. If there are others along the waterway or in the area, they will. Sometimes it may take as long as a year, but the ones you caught will be replaced. Kickouts, the young-of-the-year that mom and pop beaver kick out of the lodge each January or February to make room for the new ones that will be born, must find a new home. This beaver phenomenon takes place annually in the beaver world. If they come upon a vacant lodge with a dam or network of dams with no resident beavers to chase them away, it's a ready-made setup. They've found their new home. They'll maintain it and keep water levels where they should be. You've gotten rid of one colony and they've been replaced by a couple of yearlings. Leave them alone for a few years and they'll eventually have enough offspring to create a colony like the one you removed.

Sometimes those vacant lodges will be occupied by older beavers too. Here's what happens... Natural events may force them to move and seek new habitat. They can eat all the available food in an area and be forced to find a new one that will sustain them. I have seen that happen several times. Beavers will often set up house-keeping in areas where there are a lot of small deciduous trees or bushes, but the main trees are evergreens. Sometimes the main trees may also be oak or beech. Beavers don't like evergreens or hardwood trees. They eat hardwoods only as a last resort. Their bark simply doesn't suit their taste. As soon as they cut all the small trees or bushes and consume them, there's nothing left for them to eat. They'll move on for greener pastures. Big beavers must have big trees for sustenance. They prefer soft trees like poplar, birch, etc. Small stuff just doesn't last long.

A sure-fire way to tell how big a beaver you're dealing with can be the size of the trees it cuts. Big ones will move from an area with strictly small stuff and settle where there are bigger trees. I've seen big ones replace those I've removed annually because the dams and lodges were there and the food supply was right. I could count on it happening each trapping season. I don't know when the new residents would move in to replace the ones I caught, but know they always did. When you trap an area where there's lots of beavers and the waterways inter-connect, you can count on that happening. No matter how hard you trap, you'll never wipe them out unless you destroy the dams and lodges. In Arkansas, I had dams and lodges in big cypress breaks that produced as many as twenty four beavers annually for me over ten years. As far as I know, they're still producing because there are so many beavers in the area waiting to replace those you catch.

In Ohio, if you remove a colony of beavers (usually six, sometimes four), they're usually all that are in the area. We do not have the numbers Arkansas has and most of our waters don't inter-connect. Most Ohio beavers establish lodges and dams on creeks, lakes, or ponds. We don't have a lot of swamp beavers, although we do have beavers that create swamps by damming up creeks that back up and flood lowlands, creating swamps. Those are not the big natural swamps known as cypress breaks throughout the South and along the Mississippi Delta.

When you remove a colony of Ohio beavers from a specific spot, they're usually not replaced. Sometimes they will be replaced by a pair of nearby kickouts, but not very often. We simply don't have that many bea-

vers. If you don't tear out their dams and destroy the lodges, what happens to them? Mother nature eventually destroys them. To survive and last for years, dams and lodges must be maintained. That doesn't happen without their builders. Lodges outlast dams. It's obvious why. High water and flooding have little effect on them. They wash out dams and eliminate them. Whenever a hole is created in a dam, it continues to get bigger and bigger. Eventually the entire dam disappears. A few sticks may protrude from the bottom or a high spot on the bottom created by hand packed mud and sticks will be the only indicators a beaver dam was ever there. Eventually, even they will disappear. The beavers engineering skills are amazing but the power of water can wipe out any of the beavers' engineering feats. It often does.

While discussing beaver dams, here are a few observations this old trapper has noticed about them over the years. Nearly all critters in a specific area will use beaver dams as crossovers. That includes bobcats, coyotes, opossum, raccoon, mink, and squirrels. Even deer use them. They make great blind set/trail set locations. The top of a beaver dam is hard on boots. All those sharp beaver sticks protruding upward will put a hole in a boot instantly. Watch every step you take when walking across a dam. The deepest water, excluding the main creek channel, on a beaver pool will be the water next to the dam. There are exceptions, but in flat, dammed up areas, that's always true. Why? Beavers will erect their dams by scraping the soft mud off the bottom, above the dam they're creating. They mix it with sticks and debris to create the dam. They're capitalists. They use any available material to help them hold back the water. I've seen logs, old carpets, stoves, refrigerators, plastic, and several other items used in long beaver dams in Arkansas. I'm sure the heavy things like the carpets and appliances floated or were moved there by high water currents, but the beavers never hesitated to plaster them in place with mud and sticks. Always be aware of the deeper water above beaver dams and check its depth before you attempt to wade it.

Beaver lodges seldom go to waste when they become vacant by their builders. When dams go and leave the lodges high and dry, raccoon and mink will inhabit them. I have caught many of both in old beaver lodges. They usually last five to seven years without being maintained. They eventually rot, fall down, and break apart. They become a pile of old sticks and eventually disappear within ten years or so. In Arkansas, I set 220 body grips in them and caught a few bobcats. They make excellent set locations. Never pass them by.

When vacant lodge entries remain underwater, they make excellent otter set locations. I've taken many in Arkansas in 330's. Don't ever hesitate to set them, even though it's obvious there aren't any beavers living in them. I once set a lodge that had no mud on it and you could see through the gaps in the sticks into the living chamber. There were two chambers with three underwater entries leading to them. All three entries had soft mud on their bottoms so it was obvious no beavers were using them regularly. I still set 330's in all three, with catching otter in mind. The next day I got the shock of my life. All three traps held big beavers. Since that day I never hesitate to set old lodges. For reasons known only to the beavers, they like to go into old, uninhabitable lodges. I believe such beavers are bank hole dwellers and go into the lodges for a change of pace. I've also walked upon many such lodges and spooked beavers from them. Do this several times and the beavers will bail out as soon as they feel the vibration of your footsteps as you approach the lodges. That happened to me several times in Ohio last year. I eventually caught all three beavers in a hole I never even knew was there. I let the big female go because it was late February and she was bred. The big male weighed fifty-two pounds, so she probably weighed more. The landowner wanted them removed so I never told him about the female. I saw her twice and quit trapping for her. Never trap yourself out of business.

In Arkansas, vacant beaver lodges attract snakes by the gazillions. They become favorite denning sites for water snakes such as cottonmouths. How do I know this? I've talked with several farmers who told me. They'd go into the beaver swamp in the spring or summer to blow the lodges where I'd removed their beavers. Depending on the lodge size, they'd put a stick or two of dynamite in it and sit back and watch it blow. They told me you couldn't believe the number of snakes that always flew into the air with the mud and sticks that made the lodge. For some reason, southern snakes feel safe and comfortable inside vacant beaver lodges. They flock to them. That makes you wonder how many problems beavers have with them and what they do to

keep them away. I doubt if they try to inhabit active beaver lodges because I've never caught one in a 330 set in a lodge entrance. Some are active during the winter in Arkansas because I kill six to twelve cottonmouths with my pistol annually while beaver trapping. I could kill more, but I only shoot those that threaten me. I hate snakes, especially those that can kill me.

Vacant beaver lodges in Canada are especially valuable shelters for raccoon. Here's why. With mostly ever-green trees and few hard woods, Canadian raccoons have few hollow trees in which to den like U.S. 'coon. They den up in brush piles, holes, or old beaver lodges. It's not uncommon to find ten to twelve raccoon in a single place. That's how scarce denning sites are there. Canadian raccoon hunters must buy a daytime hunting license or a nighttime hunting license. Don't get caught hunting the wrong time of day or night with the wrong license. They seldom take less than seven to eight from any such spot. They either smoke them out, prod them with a stick and shoot them as they come out, or they tear apart the brush pile or beaver lodge and shoot them. It's considered self-defeating and poor sportsmanship to tear apart the structures so only "slob" hunters do it. There are such "slobs."

Vacant beaver lodges make excellent muskrat dens. Muskrats will often make small holes just barely underwater in active lodges and live with beavers. They seem to be quite compatible. Whenever I discover such rat entrances barely below the water level when I'm searching for beaver entries, they nearly always get a 220 body grip. Some old, large houses will have several muskrat residents. I use 220's because most holes are too big for 110's. Sometimes I believe those holes and chambers were made by small kickouts who didn't want to leave home. I haven't caught small beavers in them and that's also why I use 220's. When the kickouts vacate the holes because they grow too big for them, the muskrats move into them. I've also caught several mink in those holes. They were probably going after the muskrats inside them. I never took an otter in those small holes and that surprised me. I know they could squeeze into them and they devour muskrats. Perhaps they feared getting caught in the small hole and not being able to get out.