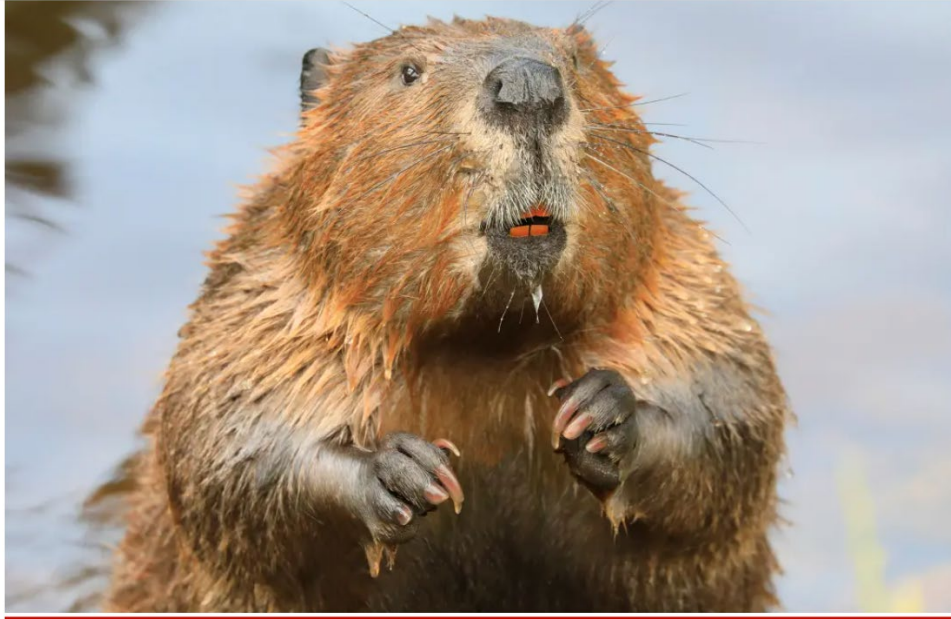


Why beavers are so much cooler than you ever thought

By Susannah Cahalan

January 14, 2023 | 11:38am | Updated



Author Leila Philip enthuses about beavers, describing them as "a smush of different animals: "Part bear, part bird, part monkey, part lizard," they can seem human, with hands that have "five nimble fingers and naked palms," with "gooselike hind feet."

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Consider the beaver: Leila Philip fell under the thrall of the 3-foot-tall, bucktoothed rodent after observing them in her backyard pond in Woodstock, Connecticut. A six-year quest followed, interviewing trappers, furriers, and beaver researchers, all of whom are just as taken by the creatures. The result is "[Beaverland: How One Weird Rodent Made America](#)," (Twelve) out now.

"Beavers helped make this country," one Beaver-obsessed trapper told her. This isn't hyperbole. There's a reason why so many schools have beavers as mascots and why they've long been symbols of wealth, industry and luck.

"I think there is an element of the sacred in [them], if only in its deep weirdness," writes Phillip, an English Professor at College of the Holy Cross.



Beaver tails are “paddle, prop, rudder, water sensor, energy source, and air-conditioning system,” according to author Leila Philip.

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For one thing, beavers are a mishmash of different animals: “Part bear, part bird, part monkey, part lizard,” they can seem human, with hands that have “five nimble fingers and naked palms,” with “gooselike hind feet.” They swim “like alligators,” she writes, with nose, eyes, and ears aligned. They communicate with other beavers by dropping castor oil from their internal anal glands. (That this oil is still used to provide everything from the vanilla flavoring in some ice creams to the strawberry flavor in Twizzlers and the musky notes of Chanel No. 5 might be a fact some would rather forget.)

Even their “reptilian tails” which look like “some terrible accident, run over by a tractor tire” contain multitudes. It is part “paddle, prop, rudder, water sensor, energy source, and air-conditioning system,” writes Phillip. The tail’s surface cells even communicate changes in water pressure so that they can feel the trickling of water and rush to a dam in distress. That same sensitive tail contains fat storage that gets beavers through the meager winter months and in the summer the tightly meshed blood vessels keep the creature from overheating.



Though beavers may kill trees, they create habitats that are richer in soil moisture with increased light.

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They help reduce threats of wildfire and expand biodiversity, and in an unexpected bonus, they **harass New Yorkers who escaped the city to move upstate** during the pandemic and enrage **recreational snowmobilers in New Hampshire**.



If you had to match their type of intelligence to another animal, it would be termites or ant colonies. Beavers work with a hive mentality rarely observed in mammals. A group of beavers can roll a hundred pound boulder into their dam. Together, a group of beavers can make infrastructure that rivals humans'. The longest ever recorded beaver dam is half a mile long — twice the length of the Hoover Dam.



What's cuter than this cuddly beaver family? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

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Beavers are ancient creatures. A million years ago, beavers the size of bears roamed the world. North America was truly once the beaver's domain with upwards of 400 million lived in rivers around the continent. The "great drying," as American geologists called what happened to many of our rivers and lakes around the country, occurred between 1600 and 1900 — during the height of the beaver fur trade. Now there are about six million beavers here, though efforts are underway to reintroduce the rodents to areas where rivers are drying or wildfires rage.

Though many still **consider beavers to be pests** (and in certain places, they are treated as such), Philip describes them as "eco-system engineers" who create wetlands by damming water, felling trees, moving rocks, and digging burrows. Though they may kill trees, they create habitats that are richer in soil moisture with increased light, which work to create "fifteen times more plankton and other microbial life than wetlands without beavers. Zooplankton in particular love the nutrients provided by beaver poop." **A 2021 study showed** that areas with beavers had greater diversity of wildlife, even birds.

“Lyrically written, meticulously observed, and exhaustively researched, BEAVERLAND is going to break your heart—and then heal it with compassion, beauty, and wonder.” —**SY MONTGOMERY**,
New York Times bestselling author of *The Soul of an Octopus*

LEILA PHILIP

BEAVER LAND

How One
Weird Rodent
Made America



The book is the result of a six-year quest interviewing trappers, furriers, and beaver researchers, all of whom are taken by the creatures.

Beavers are also natural “**firefighters**.” Not only are their wetlands less prone to wildfires, but they also provide more water to filter out debris, ash and other pollutants, which helps save fish and other water animals from polluted waters.

And if that wasn’t enough, they also happen to be adorable.

Two years ago, **a video of a beaver munching** away on cabbage made the rounds online surpassing 4 million views.

“This makes everything better,” one person commented. We couldn’t agree more.

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