

THE BEAVERS OF SHADY POND



My thoughts often take me back to our shady little pond. Our quiet haven. It was small as ponds go, maybe forty feet across. A pair of tall white birch trees provided a canopy of shade from early afternoon until sunset.

It was the deciding factor, the *pièce d’resistance*, that clinched our decision to purchase the home. After a three year search in and around Thunder Bay, we happily signed the bottom line to make the small bungalow situated on ten country acres, ours. Visitors always migrated to our gorgeous little pond. Most had great ideas on how it could be enhanced.

“Put a fountain in the middle of it.”

“How about a border of white painted rocks around it?”

“Why don’t you line the banks with colourfully painted cement?”

“You should string a hammock between those birch trees.”

What was wrong with everyone? Why couldn’t they appreciate the serenity? The natural way it nestled into a low area where the lawn met the forest behind? Why did they think it needed gimmicks to look better?

The house had been built on some high ground from which the lawn rolled to a basin in a back corner of the cleared portion of our property. A narrow stream meandered through that basin. The waterway tapered to a creek as it neared the narrow paved road in front of our home causing a slow-down of water which, in turn, formed the beautiful little pool in our back yard. The area behind the pond was deeply forested with paths and trails wandering throughout.

We moved in at the end of June and the following long holiday weekend brought the heaviest downpour of rain our area had experienced in many years. The water in the little pond rose and kept rising until the birch trees were surrounded. Eventually the water subsided somewhat but the pond had expanded slightly which instigated more suggestions.

“You should buy one of those cute little row boats and tie it to one side”.

“Build a small dock and place a lawn chair on it.”

“Little elves holding fishing rods sitting around the edge would look cute.”

For Pete’s sake! If I wanted a “cute” pond, I could have built one in our backyard in the city. Does no one understand the meaning of tranquility? The concept of nature?

As the summer progressed I took great pleasure in sitting under my stately birches watching nearby bushes blossom then produce little seeds which eventually became big, dark, juicy Saskatoons. Like a child, I would stretch out on the grass and watch the clouds sail above the tree tops. I would listen to the racket a neighbour’s gaggle of geese created every time a vehicle approached their driveway. I watched a young moose jump clear over the fence separating our property from the farm fields next door. I had never known moose could jump fences.

When autumn approached, we anticipated how the pond would look iced over. Maybe a natural skating rink? Alas, winter came with the same vengeance as the summer had. The snow arrived early carried by winds that forced it to drift so deeply it buried the pond. So much for skating on our own natural rink.

For two years we enjoyed the tranquility of our shady pond.

Then the beavers arrived.

Ray noticed small saplings being felled. One by one the small trees in the forest behind were disappearing. We had suspicions but no proof. However, there was no sign of any changes in the water level in the pond. One day my husband sensed rather than heard something near the water. When he crept down the hill, he spotted a very young beaver sitting on the grass nibbling on something close to the ground. As he approached, there was a movement in the water. He heard a slap of a tail and the little one quickly disappeared into the pond.

Within days, the water level rose. Soon it was lapping at the bases of the birch trees. Ray looked for the cause and found it in the little creek near the roadway. We discussed our options and decided if their house was torn down, they would move on. That evening, he pulled out the small logs and branches that were blocking the flow of water. By morning our reduced pond was shining in the early sunlight with a good margin of grass surrounding it. Once again in possession of my favourite reading spot, I relaxed in the shade with a book.

A few days later, the water level rose again. Ray followed the stream and sure enough, a fresh dam had been built. He swore our furry little friends had

called in contractors it was rebuilt so quickly. He also noticed more chewed tree stumps. With patience growing thin, he quickly pulled apart the dam those little rascals had cleverly put together a second time. Within days, our pond had swelled again to a small lake. I swear I could hear those animals laughing at us. Well... snickering anyway.

When our friends heard of our plight, the suggestions again came rolling in.

“Phone the Ministry. They’ll get rid of the devils.”

“I know a guy who’ll come and take them off your hands.”

“There are things you can sprinkle on the ground to get rid of them.”

“My neighbour hunts with a bow. He’ll get rid of them quietly.”

“My brother-in-law can live trap them and take them somewhere else.”

We learned the Ministry is understaffed and they don’t come out unless the water is posing a danger or a problem to roadways. The guy who would “take them off our hands” wanted a hundred bucks and just laughed when we asked how he’d do this. Sprinkling something on the ground and hunting them with a bow were both out of the question. The brother-in-law with the live trap seemed the only solution. He agreed to come out soon.

After another week of tearing down and re-building, a phone call to the brother-in-law informed us he’d been working a lot of overtime but still intended to get the job done. All he wanted was gas money for the trip out to our place. In the meantime, I resorted to doing my reading on the deck by the house instead of moving my lawn chair up and down the hill according to the ebb and flow of water. We had another rain storm that threatened to launch our house into our neighbour’s fields, but guess what — that beaver dam never budged. It was surrounded by swirling water but stayed put. We should have hired those beavers when we built the garage. They would have done a better job than our contractor.

The sun shone once again and the water subsided just enough for Ray to loosen a few branches and small logs and get the stream flowing. The brother-in-law finally showed up but didn’t realize we had a whole family of beavers. His live trap would hold only one but he assured us if he took the mother, the baby would wander off looking for her. The thought of listening to an animal crying for its mother outside our window all night didn’t sit well. He promised to come back another day and get the other one but considering how long it took him to get here the first time, we paid him for his gas and thanked him anyway.

The next day Ray spotted the mother giving one of my beautiful big birch trees the once over. Once more suggestions flew.

“Put a fence around those trees.”

“There are chemicals you can paint them with.”

“You can sprinkle something on the ground around them.”

“Get a dog. A water spaniel or hunting dog will keep those animals away.”

“Boy, if they fell those big trees you could make one helluva bonfire.”

We once again went down the list of possibilities. We tried the Ministry. Sorry. We asked the brother-in-law if he could rent a bear trap that might accommodate a large number of beavers. No can do. That left two choices, the bow hunter or a dog.

Ray went into town the next day and bought some white metal border-fencing, just tall enough to keep the beavers out. Once he had encircled both the birch trees and a nearby poplar, he sat back and waited for any sign of approaching wildlife. For two days we lived in peaceful bliss. I did not mention that the little fences looked hideous. They didn't look natural. Besides I couldn't sit and lean against my favourite tree to read. I pouted to myself.

I awoke the next morning to the sounds of profanity coming through the bedroom window. I quickly went out to the deck to see what had Ray so worked up. The water level had risen again and was more than halfway up the new little fences. Another six or eight inches and the beavers could swim right over top. Ray grabbed his truck keys and stomped off the deck. He was determined to either find the guy with the bow or buy a dog, whichever he could accomplish first. After several hours he was back. Alone. Mumbling about getting out his chainsaw.

Omigod! Not a chainsaw massacre!

“Of course not!” He bellowed. He went into the storage shed and came out with blades a humming. He wasn't going to massacre those bastards — he was going to cut down the birch trees. Oh no!

“I'll be damned if I'll let them have those trees. They may have won more than a few battles, but by god, they're not winning the war. I'll cut the birches down myself before I'll give them up.”

It took an hour of reasoning and okay, maybe a rum and coke or two, but he calmed down. That evening I pulled apart the dam myself. Then I played real dirty! I nailed a picture I had cut from a magazine to one of the birch trees. It showed a gorgeous model wearing a beautiful sheared-beaver, three-quarter length coat. I nailed it low enough so they'd be sure to see it.

The next day the water had subsided somewhat. By the second day our beautiful little pond was almost back to its original depth. I checked the dam in the creek near the road. There didn't appear to be any fresh activity. There was no rain in the forecast, only hot dry weather. Hopefully, our birch trees would be safe for a little while.

A week came and went. No fresh beaver dams. The next few weeks were the driest on record. The stream narrowed to a small creek and eventually just a trickle of water was running through the gravelly bed. Ray checked upstream to see if the beavers had decided to attack from the other direction. There was no sign of dams upstream or downstream in the immediate area. They must have sensed the dry weather approaching and moved on to deeper water elsewhere.

The pond was quite a bit shallower. There was hardly any water making its way under the bridge when the leaves started to change colour. I sat on a blanket leaning against my favourite tree, reading. The late summer and early fall continued to be dry. We were supposed to be in for a brutal winter. I thought about our beavers and hoped they had found a deep body of water somewhere to shelter them over the winter. I wonder how they know when the weather is going to change.

Ray swears they took off when they heard the chainsaw. I smile and let him think so. However, I know it was the threat of losing their precious little hides when they saw the picture of the fur coat. Subtlety always wins over rage. Neither one of us will admit we admired the tenacity and courage of those little animals in spite of the nuisance factor.

We had to leave our beautiful home when employment beckoned elsewhere. Our move took place in the middle of winter so I didn't get to say goodbye to my precious pond. I do have lots of pictures and lots of memories. I guess it's true, leave nature alone and it will take care of its own.