

Beavers and a Violin

Late spring, on the small motorcycle provided me for irrigation, I toured the ranch we took care of in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains. I checked the flow of water across the wide meadow, parked the motorcycle anyplace I needed to work and cut grass, roots, and dirt with a sharp shovel. I placed what I'd cut as small dams to change the flow of water across the meadow and then rode to the next place I needed to work in my gradual process of irrigating all the ground.

A hundred yards below the west boundary fence, a ditch flows by the edge of dense willows. Beavers dammed the ditch, and water ponded through the willows. I needed the water to flow down the ditch and irrigate about forty acres of prime hay ground. I removed the dam. Beavers worked two nights and rebuilt the dam in the four-foot wide, two-a-half-foot-deep ditch. I took the dam out again.

I stopped by three days later. Beavers had mostly rebuilt the dam. A large beaver swam back and forth in the open part of the pond, just above the dam. It wasn't afraid of me or my dog or the noisy motorcycle, and that startled me. Beavers are shy animals. Usually, I saw beavers only from at least a hundred feet away.

I said, "Hey, beaver, maybe we could work out an agreement about the water rights here." It dove below the surface and swam away from me, into the part of the pond where willows grew densely.

I pulled my rubber boots up and waded into the ditch. I pulled limbs out of the dam and threw them onto the pile of limbs beside the ditch. I shoveled mud up onto the bank. I kept turning and looking at the pond behind me. The beaver could be in muddy water where I stood knee deep. Beavers aren't aggressive, but it did have a legitimate grievance, and an animal that chews trees down could take a chunk out of my leg. But, I kept reminding myself, that's strictly a human perspective. I removed the dam and got the water flowing down the ditch without seeing the beaver again. When I got the forty acres irrigated, the beavers could have all the water again, and they would have plenty of time to get ready for winter.

Beavers also lived in Camp Creek. Water flowed down Camp Creek, hit the dams, and spread across the meadow. The beavers irrigated most of the Camp Creek field north of the highway, no work to the humans who wanted to irrigate the meadow so hay would grow. Because beaver dams spread water across the meadow, we humans had problems getting the meadow dried off enough, late summer, to get machinery on it to harvest the hay.

The beavers slow the water, and, over the years, material settled until beaver ponds were shallow and the creek channel between them was almost non-existent through dense willows. When we dried the meadows for harvest, I opened the dams every morning, to keep the water off the meadow. If the beavers worked some day shift or more water came down the creek, the beaver pond overflowed, and ground we were trying to dry off got wet. We might not be able to get machinery on it to harvest the hay without getting stuck.

Last year, when we finished haying, I drove the backhoe up along Camp Creek. I dug the stream channel deeper where I could reach it. I hired a bulldozer to blade areas I couldn't reach. We left beaver lodges alone, but we deepened ponds around the houses.

I avoid harassing wildlife, but I didn't apologize about working on Camp Creek. Now, when I take out part of the dams to keep the water from overflowing onto the meadow, the beavers still have more than two feet of water left. They make their nightly repairs, and the ponds fill all night without overflowing. The rancher's needs and the beavers' needs are better met than they were before I dug.

Many ranchers would happily eliminate all the beavers in this country. The beavers dam ditches, plug culverts, and dig ditches across hay ground to get water into more area they decide to use. Their work is often a nuisance to irrigators and harvesters. However, they serve an important function in preventing erosion. High, fast spring water channels deep in places where beavers have been eliminated and there are no longer beaver dams to slow the flow of water. High water carries away stream bank.

Beavers build habitat for other wild animals. Their ponds support ducks and other water birds and marsh birds. Lush plant growth around the ponds provides food and cover for many animals.

Along Camp Creek, the beavers provide a service that might be rare for them. They help buy a violin. I show Juniper, my daughter, seven dams that have to be opened every morning. "Pull the big limbs out. When you get some of the big limbs out, then take the pitchfork and work it under a bunch of the smaller limbs and lift them out. Throw them up on the bank, right about there. Then dig the mud out with the shovel.

"They don't have enough water to rebuild every dam every night, so just start at the lowest one and find the ones they've repaired. You can see the new part. They won't have had time to build mud onto it yet. Just take out what they've rebuilt overnight. That way, they'll still have plenty of water, but it won't overflow."

Hot summer mornings, Juniper crosses the highway, walks up through tall grass, picks up her tools and removes beaver dams.

She sticks with the hot, muddy, smelly work all through dry-off, all through haying season, until the contractor loads the hay bales and hauls them off the field. By then, she has a good start on violin money.

By the time winter hits and snow drifts down onto the beaver ponds, the beavers have had water long enough to fill all their ponds and get ready for winter.

Eventually, we moved from Whitney

Several years later, I enjoy the fruits of Juniper's labors as she practices violin while I write. I think of the beavers, and I hope they are still there and doing well. Someday, Juniper can take her violin up Camp Creek and perform for them so they share the bounty they helped provide.