

## **5. North American Beaver: A Keystone Species**

Beavers are among the largest of rodents. They are herbivores and prefer to eat leaves, bark, twigs, roots, and aquatic plants.

Beavers have been around since long before settlers came to North America. As European settlements spread, trappers trapped beavers for their fur, called pelts. While settlers may have understood the value of pelts, they failed to understand the value of beaver-created wetlands. Wetlands were drained to develop farmland, and to build houses, roads and other developments. Loss of habitat and unregulated beaver trapping nearly led to the extinction of the beaver.

Luckily beavers have made a comeback, and although some consider them a nuisance, scientists actually have proven that beavers are a "Keystone" species. Beavers play a crucial role in biodiversity, meaning many species rely on the habitats that beavers create. Therefore when we coexist with beavers we supporting the habitat necessary for the survival of many other species, and protecting the web of life upon which we depend. Beaver ponds benefit humans by decreasing damaging floods, recharging drinking water aquifers, reducing pollutants, sediments and excess nutrients from our water supply, offer drought protection and help decrease erosion. In addition, the habitats that beavers create provide us with opportunities for wildlife observation, canoeing or kayaking, fishing, photography, bird watching, or simply relaxing and enjoying nature!

These large rodents move with a waddle on land but are graceful in the water, using their large, webbed rear feet, and their paddle-shaped tails to swim up to 5 miles per hour! They can remain underwater for 15 minutes without surfacing, and have transparent eyelids that work like goggles. Their fur is naturally oily and waterproof.

Did you know that beavers do not hibernate, instead they are active all winter, swimming and foraging in their ponds even when a layer of ice covers the surface? They store enough food to sustain them all winter long.

Beavers are fascinating and I think I appreciate their hard work! Now I know why people sometimes use the phrase 'busy as a beaver'! Beavers work hard and it's nice to know that we all reap the rewards!

### **Sources:**

Beaver Solutions

[http://www.beaversolutions.com/beavers\\_keystone\\_species.asp](http://www.beaversolutions.com/beavers_keystone_species.asp)

National Geographic

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/beaver/>