



American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*)



Photo: Blaine Rothausen

American beavers may attain a weight of 70 pounds or more, making them North America's largest rodent. Their size and paddle-like tail render it nearly impossible to mistake the beaver for any other mammal on the continent. European settlement and the subsequent westward expansion of the United States were initially driven by the fur trade, especially for beaver. Heavy trapping pressure coupled with extensive deforestation and land cultivation by a growing human population nearly extirpated the beaver by 1900.



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The New Jersey Legislature afforded complete protection to beaver in 1903. In 1934, the New Jersey Fish and Game Commission (precursor to the Division of Fish and Wildlife) began augmenting the few remaining beaver colonies with nearly 1,500 beaver obtained from Wisconsin, Michigan, Wyoming, and Minnesota. A limited trapping season was re-authorized in 1947 and sporadically through the 1960s. Beavers are once again common throughout the state and have supported an annual trapping season since 1970.

Beavers can live anywhere a lake, stream, marsh or river is adjacent to the woodland habitat necessary to construct their iconic dams and lodges, although beavers may instead opt for a bank den. Dam construction is essential to the beaver as this enables water level changes needed to float lodge-building materials and food to the cache area. All beaver colony members except the very young keep the dam in good repair. Beavers primarily eat herbaceous plants like grasses, sedges, cattails, and water lilies during spring and summer, but rely on tree bark during fall and winter.

Breeding occurs in January-February with kits (usually 3-5) born about 3 ½ months later. Kits stay with their parents for 1½ to 2 years, at which point they are either driven away by the adults or disperse on their own to establish a new colony. Most vehicle-related beaver mortality occurs during these spring dispersals when young adults are struck and killed while crossing roadways.

Beavers are agents of change, beneficial or detrimental depending on one's viewpoint. Beaver ponds create habitat that benefits waterfowl, amphibians, and semi-aquatic mammals like muskrat and river otter. Beaver dams help stabilize stream flow and reduce soil erosion. At the same time, damming can result in human safety hazards (flooding of roadways and septic systems), property damage (flooding, cutting of trees), displacement of terrestrial wildlife species such as bog turtles and quail, and increased water temperatures to a level unsuited for trout. To achieve management objectives, the NJDFW Upland Game and Furbearer Project will be conducting a statewide beaver inventory during 2015 using GIS-generated "bridge over water" crossing data in predicted habitat.

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Photo: D. Gordon E. Robertson