



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

## Busy Beavers

### Elizabeth Mack

Fall is an active time for the beaver, whose condition and survival depends upon the quantity and quality of their pre-winter harvest. According to Sam Wilson, Nongame Mammal/Furbearer Program Manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, a beaver's work is no small task: "It's incredible what they can do. Beavers sometimes chop down trees so big they

have to crawl into the middle to gnaw the wood away."

Beavers are strictly vegetarian, eating the inner bark of cottonwood, willow, maple, aspen and other trees. Their winter caches are made up of limbs and branches of up to 5 inches in diameter from felled trees, which are placed under the winter ice where the food must last until spring.

The beaver is North America's largest rodent and second largest on the planet, weighing from 40 to 60 pounds and reaching up to 4 feet in length. Although slow and awkward on land, the beaver is an agile swimmer; its large flat tail and webbed hind feet aid to propel them through the water. The distinctive pistol-slap sound of their tail on water acts as a warning to other beavers when danger is near.

Beavers can remain submerged in water for up to 20 minutes by slowing their heart rates and using oxygen stored in their large livers. Their waterproof fur provides protection as well as buoyancy for their underwater activities.

The beaver's large front incisors allow them to cut and girdle trees up to 3 feet in diameter. Their upper and lower incisors, which grow continuously, are ground against each other, keeping them chisel sharp. The lips can be closed behind the incisors, allowing them to gnaw while under water. Beavers build lodges, large structures made from wood and mud with at least one deep-water exit. In Nebraska, bank

burrows are the most common den structure for beavers, dug from six to twenty feet into the bank. On sandy-soil rivers like the Platte where excavation is difficult, beavers construct their dens using the root systems from trees and shrubs.

Beavers mate for life and reproduce once a year, with mating beginning in January. Three or four young are then born in May. The kits are fully furred, with open eyes and already visible incisor teeth. Although seldom seen, the newborn beaver can swim at birth. The young will remain with the colony for up to 2 years before leaving to start a colony of their own.

Beavers live in the wild for an average of 3 to 4 years, although there has been the rare 15-year-old. According to Wilson, beaver populations are not tracked, but last year's Nebraska harvest was 11,600, down from an average of 14,000 over the last five years and their population across North America is strong.

Beavers remain an important component to the management of river and wetland habitats. Their construction of dams and surrounding water pools create habitat for a large number of wildlife species. Beavers also maintain water levels, stabilize stream flow and prevent streambed erosion. And according to Wilson, beavers are considered one of the best meats of any of the furbearer species, although I find no recipes in my wild game cookbook. I'll have to take his word for it.