

BEAVERS

Headings and Trigger words

Use this column to write down a heading and trigger words to summarise each paragraph.

The beaver is a large North American mammal that spends a lot of its time in the water. It is the largest member of the rodent family.

Adult beavers grow to about one metre in length, not counting their tail. Their eyes are small and their ears and nostrils can be closed when they are underwater. The front feet are short and have heavy claws. These work like hands and are used for feeding, grooming, digging, and building dams and lodges. Their back legs are large and the feet are webbed for swimming. Their fur is almost waterproof. They have a large flat tail that looks like the end of a canoe paddle. They use this as a warning signal by slapping it on the water and to help with swimming. They can stay under water for 15 minutes at a time. They have large, very sharp, front teeth which they use to cut down trees up to 75cm thick.

Beavers live by rivers, streams, ponds and lakes. They are most at home in water. They can move about on land but are slow and awkward and only do so to reach nearby trees for their building projects. They are one of the few animals that change their environment in a big way to provide themselves with living space and protection. They start by building a dam across a stream using sticks, bark, mud and logs, which they cut down themselves. This floods an area of the nearby woods and creates a pond. In this pond they build a lodge, a dome shaped mound of sticks and mud, which rises above the surface of the pond. The living space is then hollowed out above the water level from the inside. The lodge has several underwater entrances. Other animals suffer from winter cold and hunger while beavers stay warm in their lodge with an underwater supply of food. They can survive for up to four months while the pond is iced up.

Beavers usually stay with one mate for life and never separate until one of them dies. Beavers breed once a year, giving birth during spring. They have a litter of between two and six. The young take to the water very quickly and are skilful swimmers after a week. Beavers have been known to live for up to 20 years.

In spring and summer beavers feed on grass, leaves, and ferns. In winter they eat bark. Their winter food is stored underwater near the lodge.

Beavers are very social animals. They work together building and repairing dams and lodges, and gathering and storing food for winter. Family groups are usually made up of two adults, several two year olds, and the young from the current year. Large lodges may have several family groups. The young beavers leave when they are two years old and have learnt all the skills they need to survive. They will often travel downstream, find a mate, and start on their own dam and lodge.

The otter is the beaver's most serious enemy although bears, hawks, bobcats, owls, and coyotes prey on beavers as well. The lodge provides the beaver with a secure shelter as many predators are unwilling to take the time to dig through the walls to get at the beavers below.

Man has been the biggest threat to beavers. The region was originally explored because of the huge demand for beaver fur. Today, people pollute the water and deforest the trees that the beavers depend on. In return, beavers create



problems for man by chewing down his trees and creating floods with their dams. But the work that beavers do is very important for the environment. They create wetland habitats for other animals such as fish, turtles, frogs, birds and ducks.