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WHEN A BEAVER IS NOT A BEAVER

by

William L. Finley
Photographs by William L. and Irene Finley

"I think I have trapped a rare animal that has never been discovered before. It's the first one I have ever seen," said a young man who was interested in natural history.

"Well, this will be a record for the Pacific Northwest because many field naturalists have been hunting for specimens of rare mammals for the past hundred years," replied a government official.

"I'll tell you about it," said the young naturalist. It's a musk animal larger than a gopher. It's something like a marmot or woodchuck, but he has long whiskers. He also resembles a muskrat, but he hasn't any tail, and he has tiny eyes. His home was in a big hole just above the creek."

"Perhaps it is the rodent which some people call a mountain beaver," replied the biologist. 'I can't remember who called him that, but a mountain beaver is not a beaver. He doesn't look like one and is not even a relative. This is an animal that was discovered by Lewis and Clark when they were exploring the lower Columbia River. The Indians were offering them barter robes made from the skins of a small animal new to the explorers and new to science. The rub came as to what it was. On account of the gutteral sounds of the Indian tongue, several names were recorded like showt'l, o-gwah-lal, and swakla. Since the white men had never seen anything like it before, they thought it was some kind of a squirrel."

"In those early days the real beaver was the prized animal of the trapper," continued the biologist. "It's fur was so valuable and in such demand that it was a main medium of commodity and untold thousands of skins were shipped East and to England. Since the Chinook Indians and other tribes seemed to prefer the pelts of the little showt'l for robes and other clothing, the white men called it a mountain beaver. However, the name sewellel was used in many written accounts of this rodent, although this was a name that the Indians applied to

a blanket or robe of skins, and not to the animal itself.

"If this is a sewellel or a so-called mountain beaver that I have caught, how is it that it is so rare and unknown to the ordinary person who lives in the Pacific Northwest?" asked the young trapper.

"This is an interesting story," said the naturalist. "While it was a fur animal so well known to the early Indians that lived along the Columbia and Willamette Rivers, as these regions gradually gave way to the whites it appeared as if the sewellel went with them. This, however, was not entirely true. As stated before, it is not a true beaver but belongs to a separate and distinct family found only along the Pacific Coast from the southern part of British Columbia to the northern part of California. Scientists have given it the name Aplodontia."

The strange thing is that the so-called mountain beaver in its own range is almost as common as the squirrel that lives in the field. It lives in extensive underground burrows that are usually in moist localities. The openings are under ferns, bushes, and logs. The reason that so few people are acquainted with the sewellel is because it seldom if ever comes out in the day time, and one can never see it at night unless he hunts around its home with a flash-light. Even then it disappears quickly, so people never suspect the presence of the animal. Many may see the burrow of the mountain beaver, but perhaps take it merely for the home of a squirrel, although it is about twice as large as the entrance of a gray digger's hole.

Little is known about the breeding habits of this animal, but it is taken for granted that the young are born in April or May, and the number is two or three. It has a habit of gathering stores of green plant food and laying them out to dry in the sun much like that of the cony, and later carrying them into its subterranean storerooms.

Mr. Sheffer of Washington made a study of a nest of this animal. It was made of brake ferns and stems together with dried grass and some fine dead twigs. In the nest were found three young beavers with their eyes not yet open. The bodies were not naked like some other young animals, but were covered with fine,

soft light-brown hair. The combined weight of the three was ten ounces.

Showt'ls are very pugnacious and often fight ferociously among themselves, but one that was trapped and tamed afterward became gentle in twenty-four hours. Or perhaps it was indifference as he showed neither like nor dislike for his captor. He drank large amounts of water and munched his fern leaves audibly. He washed his face after the manner of small mammals, reaching back with his fore paws onto his shoulders and neck, the movements being short, quick dabs. When irritated, he twitched his whiskers energetically, and when most angry uttered a husky, querulous note somewhat like a cough. He often satisfied his curiosity by sniffing and working his nose which was very sensitive, for the slightest blowing on it produced spasmodic starts.

Sewellel sexes are identical. The general color is chestnut to reddish-brown with some of the longer hairs black. The under parts are plumbeous. The head is broad and blunt with long whiskers, the ears inconspicuous and nearly hidden in hair. The legs are short and stubby with long claws for digging.

The mountain beaver lives in colonies and usually a colony consists of one large family. The plan of the burrow is one or more long main runways opening to the surface by short side burrows at frequent intervals. The diameter of these runways is from six to ten inches and the passageway is kept free from loose dirt. Generally the runway follows any natural advantage such as fallen logs, and here the burrow is often so shallow that it is but a half of its usual depth, the log serving to cover it. The main system in many cases may extend for more than a hundred feet. Dirt is handled much in the same fashion as the pocket gopher works. A mass of loose soil is pushed ahead of the body by the chest and shoulders, the broad head also being used to shove aside the dirt.

As an experiment, a showt'l was liberated on the bank of a small creek and was put out into a fairly deep pool. He swam ashore showing no fear whatever of the water, nor any particular liking for it. He looked much like a swimming, tailless muskrat. There is a doubt if he ever swims for the love of it.

It was no wonder that the young naturalist thought he had found a new species, considering the unique and secretive character of the sewellel.

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Photos by WLF & EPA.

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From a natural history standpoint, the strange thing is that the so-called mountain beaver in its own range is almost as common as the squirrel that lives in the field. It is an animal that lives in extensive underground burrows that are usually in moist localities. The ~~openings~~ are under ferns, bushes and logs. The reason so few people are acquainted with the sewellel is because it seldom if ever comes out in the day time, and one can never see it at night unless he hunts around its home with a flash-light. Even then it disappears quickly, so people never suspect the presence of the animal. Many people may see the burrow of this mountain beaver but perhaps merely take it for the home of a squirrel, although it is about twice as large as the entrance of a gray digger's hole.

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We know of only one record of the nest of this animal that was found underground. It was made of brake ferns and stems together with dried grass and some fine dead twigs. In this nest were found three young beavers with their eyes not yet open. The bodies were not naked like some other young animals but were covered with a growth of fine, soft light-brown hair. The combined weight of the

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