

## Beaver damage in neighborhood

### Urban neighbors balance joy of wildlife with protection of their property

By MELISSA DeVAUGHN

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In a quiet East Anchorage neighborhood of condominiums and single-family homes with neatly trimmed yards, a colony of beavers is quickly becoming unpopular. Day after day these creatures glide along the north end of the neighborhood's man-made Reflection Lake, snipping brush, dragging trash and downing trees in the never-ending task of damming the lake.

Biologist Rick Sinnott knows better than to be anthropomorphic when it comes to the rodents. But this time of year, as busy beavers prepare for the onset of winter and begin making a nuisance of themselves -- not only at Reflection Lake but across the city -- he really wishes he could reason with them.

"If the beavers only knew they don't need to build these dams," he said. "There'd be no problems."

Therein lies the challenge for Sinnott, a wildlife biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, who must constantly monitor the Anchorage beaver population, balancing protection of the animals with prevention of property damage.

David and Susan Doering have lived alongside the beavers for four years. The first year, a lone male arrived, running a muskrat out of its bank-side den and wintering in the spot. In the spring, the beaver showed itself briefly, then disappeared.

"Then he came back in midsummer with the female and started building a dam," Doering said. "They had a litter of four kits."

The Doerings' home backs onto Reflection Lake, in what used to be a gravel pit. David Doering said he and his wife have enjoyed watching the animals and they appreciate having a slice of wilderness in their backyard.

"It's awesome viewing," he said. "A lot of people come down here and enjoy it. We'd go out and sit by the tree, and they'd come up within four feet, ignoring us. We'd watch the little babies playing around."

With a family to support, the beavers' work increased, Doering noticed. The animals began downing the cottonwoods that had



Hoping to gradually lower the level of Reflection Lake as well as the surrounding water table without flooding the neighborhood downstream, David Doering carefully removes part of the center section of a beaver dam constructed across a creek adjoining his home in East Anchorage. (Photos by ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News)



A beaver severs a submerged branch from a previously felled birch tree before hauling the treat back to its lodge and anchoring it in the lake bottom for future feeding at Reflection Lake earlier this month. (Photos by ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News)

grown up around the lake, using the limbs for the lodge and dam. At first, he was OK with it because it opened up the view to the mountains to the east. But eventually, he noticed the dam's effect:

"They keep building the dam up and raising the water level up and it gets to be 12, 14 inches higher than the back yard," he said. "We built up the (lake shore) in one little area but they keep raising the dam."

Also, he noticed, whenever heavy rains would come, or if someone pulled the beavers' dam apart, it opened a floodgate of water that saturated the Doerings' side yard. It's happened nearly a dozen times, he said.

Doerings' neighbors have been similarly affected by the industrious animals' activities.

On a recent Friday, Sinnott drove out to assess the damage. He's been monitoring the situation for months and has worked with the Doerings to minimize property damage.

At least a half dozen cottonwoods, ranging from 6 to 15 inches in diameter, had the telltale beaver-gnaw at their bases, and parts of the trees were strewn here and there. One particularly large tree had landed on a wooden privacy fence, taking out an entire panel. Along the lake shore, Sinnott pointed out where the neighbors had wrapped some of bases of the trees in chicken wire to keep the beavers from felling them. He also examined the denuded banks, where the beavers often scoop out mud and muck to chink their lodges.

"My main goal is to have beavers around but where they have few problems with people," Sinnott said, as he assessed some recently gnawed trees. "We can't just have them running amok."

## LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

Cherie Northon is a contract employee with the Anchorage Waterways Council and a member of the national nonprofit group, Beavers, Wetlands and Wildlife. She began monitoring Anchorage's beaver population in 2000, when some beavers moved onto the University of Alaska Anchorage campus. She's a geographer by profession but became a novice biologist after watching them.

"They'll take a tree down that is 40 feet long and break it into perfect, equal lengths," she said. "You can lay them down piece by piece, side by side, and they are precise. You cannot understand how the symmetry of these measurements happens. It is truly unbelievable."

The animals even attracted the attention of documentary filmmakers from Britain this summer. The British Broadcasting Corp. and "Animal Planet" teamed up to create an hour-long documentary about urban wildlife in Anchorage, and the Reflection Lake beavers are, as Sinnott put it, "movie stars."

Filmmakers John Brown, from Oxford, England, and Matt Drake were wowed by the plethora of wild



A beaver nibbles on a piece of cottonwood while perched on the trunk of the tree previously felled into Reflection Lake earlier this month. (Photos by ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News)



Local resident David Doering cups his hands around wood chips from a cottonwood, one of several trees chewed nearly through by beavers and waiting to fall along the north shore of Reflection Lake in East Anchorage late last month. (Photos by ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News)

animals within the city proper and were equally amazed that Alaskans seemed so blase about it.

During a May filming in Anchorage, Brown told the Daily News he saw ducks at Chester Creek that were beautiful, "but most people drive right by it."

He and Drake later filmed a flock of Bohemian waxwings at the Dimond Center where "people weren't paying the slightest bit of attention."

The Reflection Lake beavers were one of their favorites.

Not everyone loves beavers, though.

Sinnott said he gets frequent calls from folks who want the rodents gone. They take down trees, dam up creeks and cause yards to flood. Some worry that their pets will be injured by them -- and beavers can indeed be dangerous when confronted, Sinnott pointed out.

But a permit is required to remove the animals, he said. They can't just be disposed of.

Sinnott estimates there are about 200 beavers in the Anchorage Bowl, but no formal census has been taken, he said. They find homes where they can, squeezed between developments and alongside waterways.

There's a colony (what a family of beavers is called) at Windsong Pond off Muldoon Road. There's another at Eastchester and a third at the south end of Potter Road. They also wander up and down streams such as Chester Creek or stay for a while at places like University Lake. He said he tries to leave those who take up residence in parks alone.

"I'm really tolerant of beavers taking down trees in parks," he said. "They'll kind of eat themselves out of house and home and move on. That's how things work naturally."

But when it comes to co-existing with humans, he knows it's a delicate balancing act. The Doerings, he said, are perfect examples of city dwellers who are trying to find compromise with their wild neighbors.

David Doering has an idea that he thinks could work.

"If we could get a PVC line, a six-inch line out into the lake -- that way we'd still have the water flow and the fish could move upstream," he said. The beavers could build the dam endlessly, he said, and still not affect neighboring property.

Northon is glad to hear that. She acknowledges she is attached to the animals, but she also said they are underappreciated. Doering's idea is not a bad one, she said. In fact, Beavers, Wetlands and Wildlife offers site plans for those who want to keep their resident rodents without suffering property damage. It's worked before and can work in Anchorage, too, she said.

## **BEAVER BEHAVIOR**

Beavers have an innate drive to build dams, Sinnott said, that's part of their survival instinct. The deeper the water, the more accessible the food source in winter, when the water freezes.

They are resourceful too, using everything from pop cans to plastic bags to chink their dams or lodges. Once, Sinnott noted, a Reflection Lake beaver used one of its dead family members -- a beaver that did not survive the winter -- to plug up a hole in the dam.

"Oh, they're getting smarter," Susan Doering said, as she talked with Sinnott. "They seem to be more busy this year than last."

"They're good engineers, that's for sure," Sinnott replied.

When the beavers become too much of a nuisance, Sinnott attempts to trap them alive and relocate them to another part of the city. But at this time of year, as the animals are stepping up their work to prepare for winter, it's too late to send them to a new location.

"They would not have time to create new dens and dams," Sinnott explained. "It's too late in the season."

## HEALTHY WATER

Holly Kent, executive director of the Anchorage Waterways Council, said despite beavers' reputations as destructive rodents, they perform a key function in the health of water systems.

The dams they build act as a natural filtration system, and the giant trees they take down along the banks of creeks and lakes allow for revegetation of much more useful plants, such as bushes and grasses.

"They obviously are part of the natural ecosystem so the addition of large woody debris to the creek that the beavers add is an important nutrient source for all the fish and macroinvertebrates there," Kent said. "And by chopping the trees, they are promoting more undergrowth for the riparian vegetation ... which has a lot of root structure and reinforces the bank.

A stand of birch trees or cottonwoods, she said, blocks out the sun and makes the shorelines less stable.

A small sediment basin near Brayton Drive is a good example of beavers doing their part for the environment, Northon said. Just off Meadow Street, the pond consists of storm drainage runoff, and most days looks like chocolate milk as it exits the culverts.

But since a beaver moved in a few months ago, the color of the runoff into the culverts has changed dramatically.

"You can see it just by looking at it," she said. "That's clearer water going into Campbell Creek, which is better for the fish."

Sinnott examined the location but said he has not seen the beaver yet. They tend to come out late at night or early in the morning. Still, signs of its existence were everywhere.

On a small bridge over the pond, the water ran high, lapping at the bridge's bottom support beams. The beaver's food cache, which looked like a collection of twigs and leaves, floated nearby, fanning out from the bridge.

Downed saplings and shrubs lay piled by the bridge, and Sinnott guessed them to be building materials for a developing dam, possibly a lodge.

"There are no trees here, so the beavers have taken small shrubs and bushes," he said. "They make do with what they have."

For now, the Doerings are hoping the beaver activity will slow. David Doering regularly removes

small chunks from the dam, just enough to keep the beavers from making it any higher. But they keep building.

With freeze-up not far away, the animals will stay mostly underground, although they do not hibernate like some rodents.

The ice will keep the water from flooding the Doerings' side yard.

But it's only temporary.

"What happens in the spring, when the runoff comes?" he asked.

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Daily News reporter Melissa DeVaughn can be reached at [mdevaughn@adn.com](mailto:mdevaughn@adn.com).

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