



Water Weavers

FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, NORTH AMERICANS FOUGHT WITH beavers over water and trapped the animals for their pelts—leaving some parts of the American West without any beavers at all. These days, however, people are belatedly recognizing the virtues of beavers, says Matthew Ward, manager of The Nature Conservancy's Flat Ranch Preserve in Idaho. Simply put, he says, having beavers "means that water sticks around longer." Beaver ponds recharge groundwater, prevent flooding downstream and provide midsummer pools for trout. At TNC preserves and on partner lands in Montana, Wyoming and elsewhere, the organization has gone so far as to build so-called beaver dam analogs by pounding wooden posts into streambeds, then weaving tree limbs through. These structures slow the water only temporarily, but occasionally beavers return and take up maintenance. That is the case at an Idaho pond, Ward says, where biologists hope beavers will raise the water level enough to entice trumpeter swans to nest there. —M.B.

FACTS & FIGURES

Beavers, like people, change the landscape to meet their own needs. Those modifications can have a surprisingly big impact.

3.26
MILLION

Gallons of water storage created by a typical beaver

2,790
FEET

Length of the largest known beaver dam, located in Alberta, Canada

150
YEARS

Estimated age of the oldest beaver dams still in use

"Having beavers means that water sticks around longer."

DEEP DIVERS: Beavers can stay underwater for 15 minutes before surfacing for a breath.