



beaver

Castor canadensis

Kingdom: Animalia
Division/Phylum: Chordata - vertebrates
Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia
Family: Castoridae

Features

The beaver may grow to four feet long, including a nine- to 18-inch tail, and weigh up to 60 pounds. It has brown waterproof hair and thick underfur on its body. Its nearly hairless tail is flattened and paddle-like. The back feet are webbed for swimming. The nose and ears have valves that may be closed while swimming.

There is a special membrane to protect the eyes while it swims. The lips meet behind the large front teeth (incisors) and the back of the tongue and can be raised to close the passage to the lungs so water entering the mouth (when it is gnawing under water) does not interfere with breathing.

Natural History

The beaver lives in streams, ponds, lakes, drainage ditches, and backwaters. It eats the bark, twigs, and leaves of trees and shrubs and also aquatic plants like duckweeds, some grasses, and water lilies. It is nocturnal and has an aquatic lifestyle but will come to land to feed and raise its young or to move to a new water body. A beaver may slap its tail on the water's surface to communicate with other beaver. It also is capable of making vocal sounds. Its incisors can be used to gnaw through trees. Trees are cut above the ground as the beaver

sits or stands upright. The branches and other tree parts are cut into small pieces and taken to the burrow or lodge. Burrows containing resting and nesting areas are dug into the bank and the entrances are placed below the water level.

Generally, only one or two beaver occupy a bank burrow. Beaver also may build a dome-shaped lodge of small trees, limbs, and sticks. Several beaver may occupy a single lodge. The entrances to the lodge are below the water level, but the living area inside the lodge is above the water level. Mating occurs in January or February and the young are born in May or June. Litter size is usually three or four. Young are covered with fur at birth.

Habitats

Mississippi River; Missouri River; interior rivers and streams; natural lakes and prairie marshes; constructed lakes, ponds, and reservoirs

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.