



**Tales from a Sisters Naturalist**

by Jim Anderson

**The mighty beaver**

The beaver is Oregon's state animal and is displayed prominently on our state flag. It's the largest native rodent in North America.

History books state that as early as 1540, Europeans worked the fur business hand-in-glove with native peoples. The Europeans traded beads and trinkets for beaver fur and it wasn't until the mid-1800s that colonists had learned enough from them to go at trapping on their own and keep all the profits.

But, from 1790 to 1859 and on into the mid-1860s, competition between English and American trappers grew to the point of bloodshed. The quest for "soft gold" (beaver, otter, and other lightweight and highly valuable fine furs), created financial fortunes for beaver-killers — which had a lot to do with Oregon becoming part of the Union.

Beaver have been trapped relentlessly all over North America by trappers bent upon making a living from their fantastic fur. At one point the trapping was so heavy our beaver almost became extinct. During the Great Depression making money for food and shelter was paramount, and selling the beaver's fur was one way to do it; so much so they were almost trapped into oblivion.

But wiser minds stepped in to protect the beaver and stopped trapping, preserving this incredible animal for generations to come. Thanks to those efforts and wise state management of the species there are an estimated 15 million beaver in

the United States today.

The beaver fur that was so valuable during those early days of colonization is still going for a good price today. In the east, beaver pelts are selling for around \$14 each; while lower-quality pelts are selling for around \$9. Castoreum, a rich chemical that is part of the beaver's makeup, is still valuable in the perfume industry and is selling between \$50 to \$70 per pound.

Beaver-fur clothing is still on the market. One furrier, featured on Google, can be found selling men's beaver jackets for \$5,999. While a tanned beaver pelt is selling for \$79.95, and you can purchase a beaver blanket for \$2,057.38. Another site had a men's beaver fur and cashmere scarf on sale for \$279.95.

A beaver hat is made from felted fur. They were fashionable across much of Europe during the period 1550–1850 because the soft yet resilient material could be easily combed to make a wide variety of hat shapes. Used winter coats worn by Native Americans were actually a prized commodity for hat-making because the wear helped prepare the skins; separating out the coarser hairs from the pelts.

The fashion world can get along quite well without all that beaver fur, but aquatic communities with a need for dependable water supply need the beaver as

their partner.

Studies by hydrologists have revealed that the mighty beaver's dams back up water and replenish aquifers, with which they have the power to shift the biodiversity of ecosystems and alter the level of water tables.

A beaver's preferred habitat is one with plenty of water, since that's how beaver stay out of reach of predators. If a beaver moves into a forested area that's a little too dry for its liking, the beaver simply becomes an engineer and changes the shape of the landscape.

They use the forest around them to create dams that make huge ponds that provide water to other wildlife — even during the height of summer. And when they leave an area to live somewhere else, the dam breaks down, the flooded area eventually dries, becomes a meadow and then a forest.

Beaver dams are helpful in other ways. A study carried out by the University of Rhode Island measured just one of the positive benefits of dams: They can help remove up to 45 percent of harmful nitrogen from streams and creeks.

Beaver can reverse the effects of ruined waterways, help to prevent water shortages and revitalize drought-stricken areas with fresh water. Teaming them up with human engineers could



PHOTO BY BRIDGET TINSLEY

Alison Luce, one of several ONDA volunteers creating habitat to bring the beaver back to eastern Oregon.

make a difference for water-parched places.

Beaver are returning to areas they were once trapped out of, as a result we may see an impact on a larger scale in protecting drought-prone areas from suffering through the worst of dry times.

That in itself should remove them from Oregon's fur-trapping list.

Jefferson Jacobs of the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) has begun several long-term projects to bring beaver back

in eastern Oregon. All are multi-day planting efforts in locations as diverse as Tumalo, Cottonwood State Park, Malheur National Forest and tribal lands near Malheur National Forest. Every year ONDA has about a dozen work/project opportunities for folks to join in on. They'd love to have you out helping the mighty beaver to heal the land! And for another look at these hardy hydraulic engineers, go the website Reese Mercer sent me from Think Wild: [www.beaverworks.org](http://www.beaverworks.org).

Let us show you how much you can save this year!

Call 541-588-6245, for a free quote!

257 S. Pine St., #101  
www.farmersagent.com/jrybka

**FARMERS INSURANCE**

AUTO • HOME • LIFE • BUSINESS

REDUCE : IDEAS & INSPIRATION

**WANT VS NEED**

Rethink about it! Sure, it's pretty, but do you really need it? Buying less stuff means a little more money in your pocket, and a lot less pollution in the world. It's one of the best ways to make a difference! Learn more about how to simplify on our website.

**RethinkWasteProject.org** **RETHINKWASTE**



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Beaver skull.

Crowd participation time!

**When I say grilled, you say YUM.**

**When I say ahi, you say YUM.**

**GRILLED. AHI. AVO. TOAST.**

Our most spectacular special to date!

**THE COTTON WOOD CAFÉ**

541.549.2699 | 403 E. Hood Ave.  
Serving Breakfast & Lunch  
7 days a week, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

**ANTLER LIGHTING**

**\$175 & UP!**

Designer Shades Separate \$59 & Up  
Authentic Shed Antlers!

**Antler Arts**

EST. 1995 Custom orders welcome. We ship, too!

311 E. Cascade Ave., Sisters | [facebook.com/antlerartsinc](https://facebook.com/antlerartsinc)  
541-549-4251 | Open 7 Days A Week, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.