

Beaver rescue on the Applegate River

BY CHAS ROGERS

Living on a river can be difficult these days, especially for the wildlife that has used them for homes and survival for millions of years. With shrinking habitat, and riparian encroachment, the American beaver has been challenged by trappers, traders, and settlers since before the foundation of the State of Oregon. These native inhabitants rely on the continued flow of creeks and rivers as well as the development of wide and varied riparian habitats. Influences to the landscape over the past 150 years or more has been dramatic and detrimental to beavers following the arrival of settlers and trappers.



Beaver in live suitcase trap ready for transport to release site.



Transporting the beaver to the creek for release in the suitcase live trap.



Beaver just released into new habitat where it has a chance to survive..

I recently had the chance to experience the American beaver up close, something I had only read about or seen off in the distance in remote waterways. Most beaver inhabit pools or ponds that are dammed with sticks and logs, but some are found in muddy banks along larger streams. This particular beaver occupied a large slow water pool on the banks of the Applegate River. Numerous beaver sticks and small piles of woody debris could be seen in the river and along the banks where trails of muddy tracks lead upward to the surrounding hardwood riparian forest.

Stepping lightly, I ventured into the muddy banks to examine the humble structure where the beaver dug into the bank and covered the entrance with hundreds of small sticks. Although it did not look like much, there was a kind of special presence to the site. The quiet setting with the river slowly rolling by with swooshes and trickle sounds, deer on the opposite side grazed the low grass, and a pair of hawks circled and dove nearby. However, my fascination was with the young fish that seem to gather near the pile of sticks like a magnet attracts iron filings. There were hundreds of juvenile salmon clinging to the site for protection and survival. A school of what looked like Chinook or Coho salmon waited for a time when they would migrate downstream and return to the sea for the next stage of their life cycle.

As I moved about on the water's edge, the fish darted off in mass to the opposite side of the pile and moved through the sticks as if they knew each hole and hiding place in the cluster. They seemed to know the beaver that occupied this den was a part of their life cycle and they needed its care. The sticks and muddy debris were the best place to gather a school of fish to summer over until their time to move downstream with spring flow. This was more than a hiding place for young fish, but a sanctuary for wildlife that depend on the beaver.

I had been brought along to see the process of removing the beaver from this site. A complaint had been filed due to property damage to several small

trees along the bank. The landowner had found that the beaver had gnawed down cottonwood trees along the driveway, felling them into the road and blocking the way to his home. Other trees were in jeopardy if the beaver was allowed to continue with his habits. Rather than use a kill trap or shooting the animal, this beaver was given a chance to survive by referring the problem to a specialist in live trapping to move the beaver to an isolated stream system. The trapper donated his time and expertise to relocate this beaver for its high value as a restoration partner in maintaining stream habitat. This one beaver may get a second chance.

The live trap is designed to catch the beaver during movement, usually at night, and is a "suitcase" trap that catches and holds the animal safely. Since these are nocturnal animals, these traps will be set for several days and nights until one is caught. The trapped beaver must be rescued immediately to keep it from harm and moved to a new site at once. Most trapped animals are vicious and dangerous, but beavers are not harmful unless provoked and stay quiet in the trap in the car as it awaits its fate.

Beavers are unique among large rodents, their large flat tails are used like a rudder to guide them through the water, and are vegetarians feeding on young trees and shrubs. They live in family groups that work tirelessly to create a home for themselves and relatives. Being social animals, each beaver establishes itself into a colony where the work can be shared. They are the only other animal, besides humans, that build and develop a home and surroundings as well as create habitat for themselves and many other species of wildlife. They are constantly at work chewing sticks, digging holes, and caring for their young. In their work, they can dam up a stream and pool water, holding back surface water onsite longer and releasing it slowly for long term discharge. This holding pond is the survival area for the family to hide from its predators such as coyote, mountain lions, bears, dogs, and humans.

Holding water on the land and

releasing it slowly is only one important aspect beavers do. Ponds and wood debris collected by beavers are one of the best survival habitats for juvenile salmon. Beaver ponds slow flood waters, encourage deposition, and collect fine sediment that clogs streams. Ponds can raise the water table of the surrounding area, develop rich bottomland with high nitrogen levels, and reduce erosion. As the pond fills with sediment and gets shallower, eventually the beavers will migrate to another spot, leaving the site to regenerate into a thick wetland that supports many species of wildlife dependant on the beavers work.

Transporting and relocating the trapped beaver to another site was the most rewarding part of this process. Once we reached the designated release site, the holding cage was dragged to the new area and the trap was opened. At first, the beaver could not understand what was happening to him. Confused, but still alive, it slowly slipped into the water and swam away to a deep pool on the opposite bank. Its nose broke water and black eyes stared back in relief. Sneaking a peak back, the beaver saw that it had been given another chance to live, another chance to establish a home, another chance to complete its life cycle in a tributary of the Rogue Basin.

As I drove home that night, I realized that something great had just happened to the beaver and to me. I had witnessed the relocation and release of one of the most important of animals in the river system. Considered a pest, a nuisance to mankind, this beaver had inspired hope to our efforts to help save the salmon runs in the Rogue River Basin. It had risen from the mud of the Applegate River to the ranks of partner to society. With dedication to the river itself, we released this American icon, the lowly beaver to complete its life cycle. Questions remain as to the ultimate fate of the symbol of Oregon, the American beaver. Can we learn to protect and value the deeds of the busy beaver? Can man learn to live with this industrious builder? Where will the next beaver rescue occur and what chance does it have to survive?

Chas Rogers • 541-846-6003

Simply the best

BY SANDY SHAFFER

Our Applegate Valley Rural Fire District #9 has won yet another award! At the Special Districts Association of Oregon's annual 2009 Awards Banquet held in Portland on February 7, Fire District #9 picked up the top "Outstanding District Program" award for districts with 6-25 employees. Fire Chief Brett Fillis was there to receive the award, along with Office Manager Carey Chaput and me.

Our Fire District was nominated for their collaborative, innovative and invaluable efforts in implementing the Applegate Fire Plan. Given the checkerboard land ownership in the Applegate, we needed a leader to take charge of the daunting task of implementing the priority fuel reduction projects from the Fire Plan. Fire Chief Fillis did just that, and in the six years since the Fire Plan was written, District #9 staff and volunteers have worked with private, state and federal land owners to plan and complete strategically-placed hazardous fuels treatments across ownership borders. Grants were obtained by the District to help landowners complete defensible space work that was complementary to work being completed on neighboring federal lands.

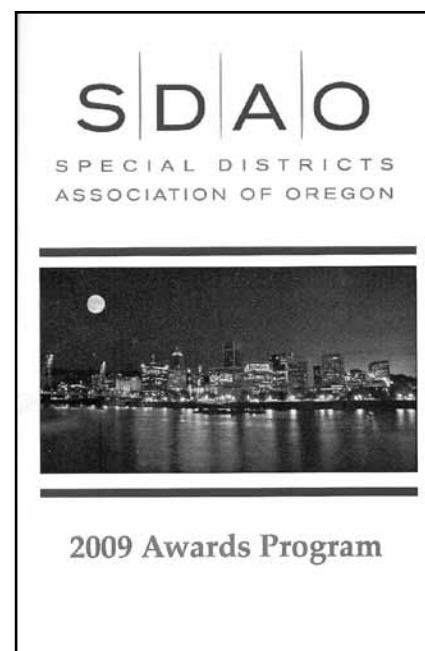
At least ten different fuels projects from our Fire Plan were completed due to the Fire District's enthusiasm and leadership.

This may sound like a "ho-hum, so what" deal at first, but only one other fire district in the state has been known to take the initiative to obtain grants and hire contractors to help their constituents perform hazardous fuels work. And when you add in the emergency preparedness planning and the fire prevention and education efforts that the Applegate Fire District has helped provide to us, our valley is more fire safe and fire savvy because of their work.

So, please join me in congratulating our Applegate Fire District on this wonderful honor!

Sandy Shaffer • 541-899-9541
Applegate Fire Plan Coordinator

Who is the Special Districts Association of Oregon (SDAO), and what is a "special district," you ask? The SDAO was formed in 1979 to provide a broad range of membership services to special service districts throughout the state. It provides advocacy and a united



voice with state and other government administrative agencies, as well as training and information resources and support. Their mission is "to assist special service districts in providing cost-effective and efficient public services to the people of Oregon."

The SDAO has 35 different types



of districts, representing over 900 local governments of varying sizes and functions throughout the state. Fire/ambulance districts are the most common district types, followed by water, irrigation, road, sanitary, park and recreation, cemetery and charter school districts