

Introduction

The first time I tried to meet Drew Reed, the most prolific beaver mover in the state of Wyoming, I was thwarted by a sick goat. Reed and I had made plans to rendezvous in Jackson, the tony resort town south of Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks; I was en route when Reed called, his drawl pinched with concern. One of his goats, a 220-pounder named Maximus, had been laid low by a mysterious malady, and the vet needed to intervene ASAP. Reed was sorry, but we'd have to postpone until his beloved creature had been cured. Maybe, he added hopefully, Maximus just needed some electrolytes. I was disappointed, but also felt some admiration — here was a guy who cared enough about animals that he'd blow off a human engagement to tend to the health of a ruminant.

A month later, with Maximus in finer fettle, I found myself in the front seat of Reed's pickup, bouncing along a dirt road through the Gros Ventre Valley. A transverse crack glittered in the windshield; the rear window was plastered with a decal of a *T.-rex*-sized billy terrorizing tiny humans, accompanied by the phrase MY GOAT ATE YOUR STICK FAMILY. A boxy white trailer rattled in our wake, threatening to decouple from Reed's truck with every rut. Reed and his wife, Amy, normally used the trailer to tote Maximus. Today it conveyed a more sensitive cargo.

"Hope they're doing okay back there," Reed muttered.

The road, pocked with potholes deep enough to drown in, clung tight to the hillside, nearly forcing us to trade paint with cars creeping in the opposite direction. The Gros Ventre River ran below, a shimmering blue thread twisting through sere sagebrush meadows. Reed, a baseball hat yanked low over his shaved head, grumbled at unyielding drivers. At last the road descended into the valley, where an amber tributary called Cottonwood Creek gushed into the mainstem of the Gros Ventre. Reed executed a nimble three-point turn and backed his rig down to the creek so that the

trailer's rear door opened onto the water. He clambered down from the cab for a quick debrief.

"The main thing we have to be prepared for is, they could separate," he warned me and a few onlookers who'd followed in a separate car. "It's doubtful they're gonna go upstream like I'd like for 'em to do — path of least resistance and all. I'm gonna do everything in my power to keep 'em together. The last thing we need is someone running between 'em." He paused for emphasis. "The welfare of these animals is *always* paramount over people's enjoyment."

A chorus of "I agree!" rose from the small crowd. "All right, then," Reed said. He unlatched the trailer door, lowering it into the creek to form a ramp. Then he stepped back.

The beaver who poked her head from the straw-covered bed of Drew Reed's trailer was *big* — big enough to make me inhale involuntarily. If you have ever seen a beaver, you have probably seen her swimming at a distance, with most of her estimable mass concealed, iceberg-like, underwater: a misleading view that creates the impression that beavers are little larger than housecats. Not so. This animal weighed sixty pounds, as much as many golden retrievers, a dense bolus of muscle and fat and milk chocolate fur — the linebacker of the animal kingdom. She — a pronoun I assigned her at random, as beavers' sexes are notoriously difficult to discern — stood precariously on her hind legs in the doorway, nose twitching as she surveyed her surroundings, front paws held to her chest tentatively like Oliver Twist asking for more gruel. But her caution didn't last long: Here was running water and standing cottonwood, all the habitat and food that a bark-noshing aquatic rodent could desire. The beaver dropped to all fours and waddled down the ramp, hips and rump swaying like the ponderous bulk of a stegosaurus. This was not an animal well suited for land travel.

"Hey, bud!" Reed cooed. "Water, huh? You like water?"

No sooner had the hefty adult emerged than she was followed by a baby beaver, a kit, hardly bigger than a Chihuahua. We murmured our delight; even the hard-boiled Reed, I figured, would have to admit the thing was pretty dang cute. The juvenile hesitated, and Reed gave it a swift pat on the butt, as you would to an obstinate horse. "Go with Mom," he chided. The two beavers scudded into the stream, weaving back and forth, half swimming and half walking, the water not quite deep enough to submerge.

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They looked understandably disoriented – they’d endured a long journey in a dark chamber, been flung into new environs, and were surrounded by strange hairless bipeds. Their ordeal, I thought, was like getting snatched by aliens from your bed in Sacramento, spending a day in isolation aboard a mysterious mothership, and then being dumped unceremoniously into a cornfield in Topeka.

That confusion, perhaps, explained what happened next. With a flick of his oar-like tail, the kit abandoned his parent and took off downstream, slipping like a trout over a rocky rapid. In defiance of Reed’s fervent wishes, the pair was separating. Absent an adult, the kit would surely perish, either of starvation or in a cougar’s jaws. Reed dashed over the cobble toward the bottom of the rapid, where he stood in shin-deep water, crouched like a shortstop preparing to corral a wicked grounder. Deftly he plunged his arm into the stream and, to our astonishment, hoisted the kit up by his leathery tail, holding him aloft like a trophy fish. Other handlers, before and since, have warned me against carrying beavers by the tail, for fear of dislocating the appendage. Although Reed isn’t persuaded by the dislocation theory, he doesn’t make a habit of tail grabbing, either. But in the heat of the moment, what choice did he have?

“That little booger got into that deep hole right in front of me and I was like, oh crap!” Reed told me later, after the beavers had been reunited and shooed upstream. “There’s really no other place on a beaver to grab ’em.”

The Gros Ventre River flows into Jackson Hole, the glacier-flattened valley that lies beneath the bladed Teton Range. Today Jackson Hole is a playground for the Patagonia class, a ritzy sprawl of ski slopes and mountain biking trails and upscale art galleries. Two centuries ago, though, the valley was defined by fur. In the autumn of 1807, John Colter, a former member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, followed the Bighorn River into the Rocky Mountains to trade with the Crow Indians. Colter wandered Wyoming for months in the snowbound dead of winter, toting little more than a rifle and a pack. Although no one’s quite certain where his route took him, he’s considered the first white man to enter the hole, a word trappers used to describe broad, game-filled valleys. He also found lots of beavers.

In the decades that followed, a parade of fortune seekers followed Colter’s footsteps into the Northern Rockies, a region that, blared one

newspaper, “possess[ed] a wealth of furs not surpassed by the mines of Peru.”¹ These travelers were the famed mountain men, rapacious beaver trappers who, between the early 1820s and the late 1840s, systematically ransacked just about every pond and stream between Colorado and California. Most of those pelts flowed to the Missouri River and thence to St. Louis, to be shipped off to the East Coast or Europe for conversion into fashionable hats. With breathtaking speed, the mountain men demolished their resource, virtually wiping out beavers throughout the American West. “The trappers often remarked to each other as they rode over these lonely plains that it was time for the white man to leave the mountains,” Osborne Russell, a beaver hunter who frequented Wyoming and Utah, wrote in 1841, “as beaver and game had nearly disappeared.”²

Although the reign of the mountain men was brief, they left an enduring ecological legacy. If you know nothing else about beavers, you’re probably aware that they build dams: walls of wood, mud, and rock that hold back water and form ponds and wetlands. The rodents also construct lodges, towering houses that often rise from open water like volcanic islands. These structures don’t just house beavers themselves: Trumpeter swans squat rent-free atop beaver lodges, commandeering them as nesting platforms upon which their chicks shelter from land-bound predators like foxes. The majestic white birds also crave the elodea, sago pondweed, and other aquatic plants that grow in shallow beaver ponds.

By trapping out the Northern Rockies’ beavers, the mountain men unwittingly destroyed countless acres of prime swan habitat. A few decades later farmers and ranchers finished the job by draining wetlands to make way for cattle and alfalfa. Today only ninety or so resident trumpeter pairs linger in the region, and chicks seldom survive. “Beaver ponds would’ve been strung out like necklaces down these drainages, and this landscape would have been a giant sponge,” a swan biologist named Ruth Shea told me. “That’s why there were swans nesting everywhere. Swans are the poster child for the importance of the beaver.”

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the fur trade had largely dissolved, a victim of its own success. Beavers began to recover, much to the chagrin of Jackson’s landowners, who rang up wildlife control trappers whenever the rodents gnawed down cottonwoods, dammed irrigation ditches, or flooded fields. No longer did we regard beavers primarily as pelts — just pests.

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That didn't sit right with Drew Reed, an Arkansas native who, in 2008, took a job at the Wyoming Wetlands Society. Intrigued by beavers' ecological potential, Reed set out to make capture-and-relocation a priority. He taught himself to live-trap and hung up flyers advertising his services. Word of Reed's humane approach spread among Jackson's wildlife-loving citizenry like brushfire in dry grass. "All of a sudden my phone was ringing off the hook," he told me. Some trappers threatened their new competitor; others referred him clients. Before long he was dumping beavers in the Gros Ventre River two or three times a week. Filmmakers arrived from the BBC to shoot a documentary, salaciously titled *Beavers Behaving Badly*.

In 2015 Reed and Shea scraped together funding for a new nonprofit, the Northern Rockies Trumpeter Swan Stewards. Birds may be their remit, but their focus is beavers. Usually Reed arrests his quarry in suitcase-like live traps, though sometimes he's forced to get creative. Just before I came to Jackson Hole, he wrangled an especially wily fugitive with a salmon net — "a harebrained scheme," he gleefully acknowledged. "It was utter chaos when that beaver hit the net. It was a rodeo." He held on. The beaver was moved.

All told, Reed estimates he's relocated north of 250 beavers. How many have survived is another question. Although he's recaptured some old friends years later, many, no doubt, have been devoured by bears, wolves, and cougars, or slain by trappers. Without Reed, though, their fate would have been more certain, and grimmer. "Even if one landowner is willing to let the beavers stay, their neighbors probably won't — and we all know that beavers don't understand what a property line is," he told me as we bounced home. "I'm usually given an ultimatum: You relocate 'em, or they're dead. We're giving them a second lease on life, a chance to try to go make it. I call it reseeding a drainage. They're not gonna stay exactly where you put 'em, but I'm happy if they stay somewhere in the area and start doing their work."

As if on cue, Reed threw the truck in park and raised binoculars, ogling a lodge protruding from a distant pond. The structure, he told me, was likely the handiwork of a relocatee: He'd recently spotted one of his ear-tagged beavers cruising around the complex. "Oh, heck yeah — that thing has *grown*," he enthused. "That's three times the size it was a couple years ago." He gazed into the floodplain below, the wide sagebrush pasture parched and

sepia and swanless as it rolled away from the river. “Man,” he murmured, almost to himself, “I’d love to see that whole meadow underwater.”

Close your eyes. Picture, if you will, a healthy stream. What comes to mind? Perhaps you’ve conjured a crystalline, fast-moving creek, bounding merrily over rocks, its course narrow and shallow enough that you could leap or wade across the channel. If, like me, you are a fly fisherman, you might add a cheerful, knee-deep angler, casting for trout in a limpid riffle.

It’s a lovely picture, fit for an Orvis catalog. It’s also wrong.

Let’s try again. This time, I want you to perform a more difficult imaginative feat. Instead of envisioning a present-day stream, I want you to reach into the past — before the mountain men, before the Pilgrims, before Hudson and Champlain and the other horsemen of the furpocalypse, all the way back to the 1500s. I want you to imagine the streams that existed before global capitalism purged a continent of its dam-building, water-storing, wetland-creating engineers. I want you to imagine a landscape with its full complement of beavers.

What do you see this time? No longer is our stream a pellucid, narrow, racing trickle. Instead it’s a sluggish, murky swamp, backed up several acres by a messy concatenation of woody dams. Gnawed stumps ring the marsh like punji sticks; dead and dying trees stand aslant in the chest-deep pond. When you step into the water, you feel not rocks underfoot but sludge. The musty stink of decomposition wafts into your nostrils. If there’s a fisherman here, he’s thrashing angrily in the willows, his fly caught in a tree.

Although this beavery tableau isn’t going to appear in any *Field & Stream* spreads, it’s in many cases a more historically accurate picture — and, in crucial ways, a much healthier one. In the intermountain West, wetlands, though they make up just 2 percent of total land area, support 80 percent of biodiversity; you may not hear the tinkle of running water in our swamp, but listen closely for the songs of warblers and flycatchers perched in creek-side willows. Wood frogs croak along the pond’s marshy aprons; otters chase trout through the submerged branches of downed trees, a forest inverted. The deep water and the close vegetation make the fishing tough, sure, but abundant trout shelter in the meandering side channels and cold depths. In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean captured the trials and

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ecstasies of angling in beaver country when he wrote of one character, “So off he went happily to wade in ooze and to get throttled by brush and to fall through loose piles of sticks called beaver dams and to end up with a wreath of seaweed round his neck and a basket full of fish.”³

And it’s not just fishermen and wildlife who benefit. The weight of the pond presses water deep into the ground, recharging aquifers for use by downstream farms and ranches. Sediment and pollutants filter out in the slackwaters, cleansing flows. Floods dissipate in the ponds; wildfires hiss out in wet meadows. Wetlands capture and store spring rain and snowmelt, releasing water in delayed pulses that sustain crops through the dry summer. A report released by a consulting firm in 2011 estimated that restoring beavers to a single river basin, Utah’s Escalante, would provide tens of millions of dollars in benefits each year.⁴ Although you can argue with the wisdom of slapping a dollar value on nature, there’s no denying that these are some seriously important critters.

To society, though, beavers still appear more menacing than munificent. In 2013 I lived with my partner, Elise, in a farming town called Paonia, set high in the mesas of Colorado’s Western Slope. Our neighbors’ farms and orchards were watered by labyrinthine irrigation ditches, each one paralleled by a trail along which the ditch rider — the worker who maintained the system — drove his ATV during inspections. In the evenings we strolled the ditches, our soundtrack the faint gurgle of water through headgates, our backdrop the rosy sunset on Mount Lamborn. One dusk we spotted a black head drifting down the canal like a piece of floating timber. The beaver let us approach within a few feet before slapping his tail explosively and submarining off into the crepuscule. On subsequent walks we saw our ditch beaver again, and again, perhaps half a dozen times altogether. We came to expect him, and though it was probably our imaginations, he seemed to grow less skittish with each encounter.

Like many torrid romances, our relationship acquired a certain frisson from the certain knowledge that it was doomed. Although our beaver showed no inclination to dam the canal — and indeed, beavers often elect not to dam at all — we knew the ditch rider would not tolerate the possibility of sabotage. The next time the rider passed us on his ATV, a shotgun lay across his knees. The grapevine gave us unhappy tidings a few days later: Our ditch beaver was no more.

That zero-tolerance mentality remains more rule than exception: Beavers are still *rodenta non grata* across much of the United States. They are creative in their mischief. In 2013 residents of Taos, New Mexico, lost cell phone and internet service for twenty hours when a beaver gnawed through a fiber-optic cable.⁵ They have been accused of dropping trees atop cars on Prince Edward Island,⁶ sabotaging weddings in Saskatchewan,⁷ and ruining golf courses in Alabama — where, gruesomely, they were slaughtered with pitchforks, a massacre one local reporter called a “dystopian *Caddyshack*.”⁸ Sometimes they’re framed for crimes they did not commit: Beavers were accused of, and exonerated for, flooding a film set in Wales.⁹ (The actual culprits were the only organisms more heedless of property than beavers: teenagers.) Often, though, they’re guilty as charged. In 2016 a rogue beaver was apprehended by authorities in Charlotte Hall, Maryland, after barging into a department store and rifling through its plastic-wrapped Christmas trees.¹⁰ The vandal was shipped off to a wildlife rehab center, but his comrades tend not to be so lucky.

Although our hostility toward beavers is most obviously predicated on their penchant for property damage, I suspect there’s also a deeper aversion at work. We humans are fanatical, orderly micromanagers of the natural world: We like our crops planted in parallel furrows, our dams poured with smooth concrete, our rivers straitjacketed and obedient. Beavers, meanwhile, create apparent chaos: jumbles of downed trees, riotous streamside vegetation, creeks that jump their banks with abandon. What looks to us like disorder, though, is more properly described as complexity, a profusion of life-supporting habitats that benefit nearly everything that crawls, walks, flies, and swims in North America and Europe. “A beaver pond is more than a body of water supporting the needs of a group of beavers,” wrote James B. Trefethen in 1975, “but the epicenter of a whole dynamic ecosystem.”¹¹

Beavers are also at the center of our own story. Practically since humans first dispersed across North America via the Bering Land Bridge — replicating a journey that beavers made repeatedly millions of years prior — the rodents have featured in the religions, cultures, and diets of indigenous peoples from the nations of the Iroquois to the Tlingit of the Pacific Northwest. More recently, and destructively, it was the pursuit of beaver pelts that helped lure white people to the New World and westward across it. The fur trade sustained the Pilgrims, dragged Lewis and Clark up the

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Missouri, and exposed tens of thousands of native people to smallpox. The saga of beavers isn't just the tale of a charismatic mammal — it's the story of modern civilization, in all its grandeur and folly.

Despite the fur trade's ravages, beavers today face no danger of extinction: Somewhere around fifteen million survive in North America, though no one knows the number for certain. In fact, they're one of our most triumphant wildlife success stories. Beavers have rebounded more than a hundredfold since trappers reduced their numbers to around one hundred thousand by the turn of the twentieth century. The comeback has been even more dramatic across the Atlantic, where populations of a close cousin, the Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*), have skyrocketed from just one thousand to around one million.¹² Not only have beavers benefited from conservation laws, they've helped author them. It was the collapse of the beaver — along with the disappearance of other persecuted animals, like the bison and the passenger pigeon — that sparked the modern conservation movement.

But let's not pat ourselves on the backs too heartily. As far as we've come, beaver restoration has many miles farther to go. When Europeans arrived in North America, the naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton guessed that anywhere from sixty million to four hundred million beavers swam its rivers and ponds.¹³ Although Seton's appraisal was more than a bit arbitrary, there's no doubt that North American beaver populations remain a fraction of their historic levels. Will Harling, director of the Mid Klamath Fisheries Council, told me that some California watersheds host just one one-thousandth as many beavers as existed before trappers pursued them to the brink of oblivion.

That story, of course, isn't unique to California, or to beavers. Europeans began despoiling North American ecosystems the moment they set boots on the stony shore of the New World. You're probably familiar with most of the colonists' original environmental sins: They wielded an ax against every tree, lowered a net to catch every fish, turned livestock onto every pasture, churned the prairie to dust. In California's Sierra Nevada, nineteenth-century gold miners displaced so much sediment that the sludge could have filled the Panama Canal eight times.¹⁴ We are not accustomed to discussing the fur trade in the same breath as those earth-changing industries, but perhaps we should. The disappearance of beavers dried up wetlands and meadows, hastened erosion, altered the course of countless streams, and imperiled water-

loving fish, fowl, and amphibians — an aquatic Dust Bowl. Centuries before the Glen Canyon Dam plugged up the Colorado and the Cuyahoga burst into flame, fur trappers were razing stream ecosystems. “[Beavers’] systematic and widespread removal,” wrote Sharon Brown and Suzanne Fouty in 2011, “represents the first large-scale Euro-American alteration of watersheds.”¹⁵

If trapping out beavers ranked among humanity’s earliest crimes against nature, bringing them back is a way to pay reparations. Beavers, the animal that doubles as an ecosystem, are ecological and hydrological Swiss Army knives, capable, in the right circumstances, of tackling just about any landscape-scale problem you might confront. Trying to mitigate floods or improve water quality? There’s a beaver for that. Hoping to capture more water for agriculture in the face of climate change? Add a beaver. Concerned about sedimentation, salmon populations, wildfire? Take two families of beaver and check back in a year.

If that all sounds hyperbolic to you, well, I’m going to spend this book trying to change your mind.



Like most people who enjoy mucking about in streams, I’ve had my share of beaver encounters. I was always impressed by their underwater grace, their ingenuity, and their familial devotion; I once watched a mated pair fastidiously groom each other for a solid half hour in Glacier National Park. But I didn’t become a true acolyte until a dreary Seattle morning in January 2015, when I shook off the damp and pushed into a fluorescent-lit Marriott conference room.

It was an unlikely setting for a profound conversion, but enlightenment is not known to strike predictably. Over eight hours a parade of tribal, federal, and university scientists — clad almost exclusively in flannel, the customary uniform of northwestern biologists — presented compelling evidence that our landscapes had been blighted by an absence of beavers, and that bringing them back was the most effective way to right a host of wrongs. The conference revealed a hidden world underlying my staid perception of aquatic ecology, one in which a pudgy rodent was responsible for everything from the dimensions of southwestern arroyos to Oregon’s prolific salmon runs. Like the diligent journalist that I am, I had forgotten my notebook. Instead I scribbled down thoughts on cocktail napkins;

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by day's end my pile was covered in exclamation points and capital letters: FLOODPLAIN CONNECTIVITY! SLOW-WATER REFUGIA! RIPARIAN VEGETATION FEEDBACK LOOP! I walked in a feckless agnostic; I walked out a disciple.

That summer, still captivated, I traveled to central Washington to visit one of the West's foremost beaver evangelizers: Kent Woodruff, then a Forest Service biologist and the director of the Methow Beaver Project. For three days Woodruff interpreted his beaver-influenced corner of the country and brokered a personal introduction to the animals themselves. (*Very* personal: By my second morning Woodruff had me grappling with a hefty male in an attempt to harvest some of his anal secretions – the beaver's, that is.) The articles I wrote about the Methow Project's approach to beaver relocation (see chapter 4 for much more) appeared in the magazine *High Country News*, and ultimately birthed this book.

In researching *Eager*, I traveled just about everywhere that beavers can be found, from the slickrock deserts of Utah to the hardwood forests of Vermont to a highwayside canal in Napa, California. I met beavers on farms and beavers in forests, beavers in raging rivers and beavers in irrigation ditches, beavers in wilderness areas and beavers in Walmart parking lots. Nor did I confine myself to North America: Elise and I also journeyed to the moors of southwest England and the sheep-dappled hills of the Scottish Highlands to document beavers' fitful return to Britain. Although beavers could historically be found just about anywhere in the United States – excepting south Florida, where they would make hors d'oeuvres for alligators – this book is primarily set west of the 100th meridian, the line of longitude that carves through the Great Plains. Beyond that decisive boundary, rainfall dries up and beavers become even more crucial. “Back east you have water no matter what, but we have streams that run dry,” Mary O'Brien, a scientist based in arid southeast Utah, told me when I visited. “And beavers can just make wetlands appear here. They're kind of magic.”

O'Brien and her ilk form nothing short of a movement, a growing coalition of wildlife biologists and land managers and renegade ranchers who are protecting and restoring beavers for every reason under the sun – to create butterfly habitat, to nourish cattle, to purify drinking water, to rebuild eroded river valleys. And the adherents of this movement have a name: They call themselves Beaver Believers.

There is no single trait that unites Beaver Believers, besides, of course, the unshakable conviction that our salvation lies in a rodent. (They also share the tendency to proselytize: *Shy* is not a word you'd use to describe the movement's members.) In an era when most environmental actions spawn polarized outrage, Beaver Believers span party lines: You'll meet plenty of dyed-in-the-wool beaver huggers in this book, but you'll also encounter red state stockmen. Many devotees are trained biologists. Many, I've noticed, are not. The world's most knowledgeable Beaver Believers include former hairdressers, physician's assistants, chemists, and child psychologists. Perhaps there are dozens of ex-laypeople fighting for weasels and kangaroo rats, but somehow I doubt it. There is, I think, something uniquely beguiling about beavers: their ability to support other species, their complex and endlessly interpretable behavior, their fundamentally human attitude toward modifying landscapes. They are *visible* in a way that few other species are — and so are their admirers. “Now people see me in town and say, ‘Oh, you're the beaver gal!’” Charnna Gilmore, a real estate agent turned devout Believer, told me when we met in California's Scott Valley. She grinned defiantly, the smile of one who has found inner peace. “My family, they think I'm having a midlife crisis.”

People outside the cult, I've found, tend not to share Gilmore's affection for our tree-chewing brethren. Since my conversion to Believerdom, I have rhapsodized about the virtues of beavers to more than my fair share of friends, family, and complete strangers at bars signaling frantically for their checks. Usually I get polite laughter and dirty jokes. (Admit it — you were thinking it.) Sometimes I get stories: about fathers losing their prized apple trees to rascally beavers, tail-slaps shattering the stillness of an Adirondack lake, childhood hours whiled away dynamiting beaver dams on a Montana ranch. People often tell me they think beavers are cute.

And that's wonderful: I think beavers are cute, too. But I urge you, dear reader, not to underestimate these extraordinary mammals. Many animals are cute; very few are ecosystem engineers. Even acknowledging that beavers store water and sustain other creatures is insufficient. Because the truth is that beavers are nothing less than continent-scale forces of nature, in large part responsible for sculpting the land upon which we Americans built our towns and raised our food. Beavers shaped North America's ecosystems, its human history, its geology. They whittled our world, and they could

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again — if, that is, we learn to treat them as allies instead of adversaries. Our future must be as entwined with beavers as our past has been, and yet we must completely reverse the nature of our relationship. They will build it, if we let them come.

As Melville wrote, “To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme.”¹⁶ The book you hold in your hands may not be *Moby-Dick*, but it’s not the theme’s fault. The story of beavers is the story of how North America was colonized; why our landscapes look the way they do and how they’ve changed; what measures we can take to forestall the deterioration of our rivers, the disappearance of our biodiversity, and the ravages of climate change. Most of all, *Eager* is about the mightiest theme I know: how we can learn to coexist and thrive alongside our fellow travelers on this planet.