

North American beaver

Castor canadensis

Often to people's surprise, the Chicago River system is home to beavers. Their presence is a good sign of health for our improving waterway and an amazing sight to see, considering an adult beaver typically weighs 44 pounds and can be four feet long including its tail. The beaver is the largest rodent in North America and the second-largest in the world, after the South American capybara. This makes them one of the biggest mammals to be found in the Chicago River system.

The beaver is semi-aquatic and is suited to life on land, although it prefers the water. It has a large, flat tail and webbed hind feet for swimming. Excellent swimmers, a beaver may remain submerged up to 15 minutes. Its eyes are covered by a third eyelid (called a nictitating membrane) which allows for underwater sight, and the nostrils and ears close when the animal is submerged. Beavers are nocturnal and are active mainly at night.

The beaver's fur is very warm, consisting of dual layers of long, thick outer hairs and short, soft inner hairs. The beaver waterproofs its fur in an oily substance produced by its own body. Beavers were very common throughout the region several hundred years ago. They were prized for their thick, warm fur, and by 1860, had all but disappeared from over-hunting. In 1950, the Cook County Forest Preserves began reintroducing beavers and, today, sightings are again common. "I've seen trees chewed, north and south of River City as well as along Bubbly Creek and near Diversey," said Margaret Frisbie, executive director of Friends of the Chicago River. "It is exciting to know that our efforts are bringing beavers and other wildlife back to the Chicago area which can be a good home for wildlife, if we make room for them."

Beavers chew on trees for several reasons. One, they're rodents, and all rodents have continuously-growing incisors which must be worn down. Two, beavers love to eat leaves, buds, and inner bark of young trees and wetland plants. They prefer aspen and poplar, but also eat birch, maple, willow, cherry, cattails, and water lilies. Three, they need trees and branches for dam-building. The largest beaver dam ever discovered was 2,790 feet in length—more than half a mile long (and double the Hoover dam)—located in northern Alberta.

The purpose of the dam is to create a refuge of deep water, enabling the beaver to evade predators. When deep water is already present, such as on the Chicago River, the beaver may make its home in a bank burrow with an underwater entrance. Besides providing a safe home for the beaver, dammed ponds also provide habitat for waterfowl and fish, and even reduce soil erosion and flooding impacts.

