

BEAVERS

Larry Davidson, BU1768

In the mid-1990s, I viewed a thematic stamp exhibit in New York City by Mary Ann Owens on elephants. Inspired by her work, I decided to create a thematic exhibit, and so in 1999 I attended a seminar on thematic exhibiting by Mary Ann at APS headquarters in Pennsylvania. Because I would be exhibiting in the United States and Canada, I wanted a theme that would be of interest to viewers in both countries. I also wanted an original subject. Then I thought of Canada's first stamp of 1851 depicting a beaver. Perfect! Not only is the beaver Canada's national emblem (officially designated in 1975), but the beaver is also the state mammal of New York and the state animal of Oregon.



Since there was no ATA checklist for beavers, I spent five years on my own searching for suitable material. I soon discovered that the beaver is present in much of North America (the species *Castor canadensis*), and also in many regions of Europe and Asia (the species *Castor fiber*). Over 20 countries have issued postal items depicting beavers. A few of my favorite stamps are from Switzerland (2012), Estonia (2005), and Croatia (2003).



Beyond just single stamps, there were also booklets, souvenir sheets, plate blocks, postal cards and other postal stationery. Further searches turned up perfins, black prints, postage meters, photo essays, pictorial cancellations, perforation shift and color shift varieties, die proofs, and progressive color proofs, to name a few.



I also discovered an ideal maximum card of an Austrian issue of 1982—the perfect combination of stamp, an apt illustration (closely related to, but not an exact copy of the stamp), and a pertinent pictorial cancellation. Maximum cards, as well as first day covers, can be used sparingly in a thematic exhibit, but preferably no more than one per 16-page frame.

As my search for material progressed, I decided to create a display exhibit. This allowed me to include many non-philatelic items that I found and wanted to include, such as pieces of beaver fur and felt, coins like Canada's 5-cent piece, wildlife seals, badges, matchbook covers, waterfowl stamps, nature cards, and so on.

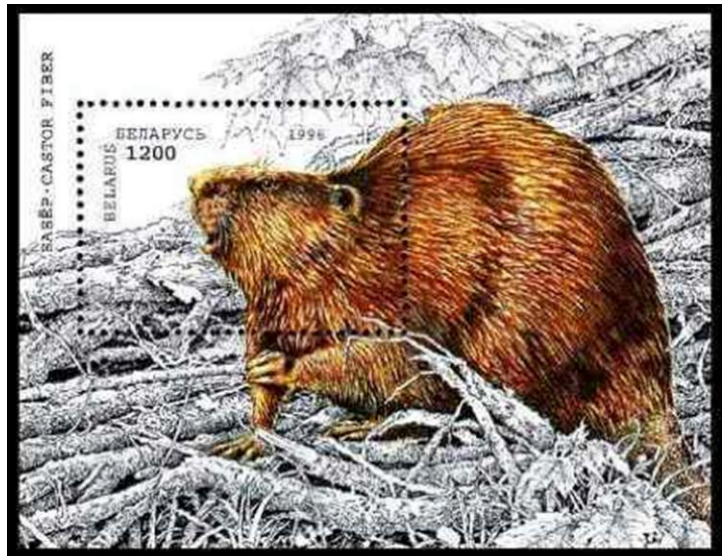


As I did further research on the beaver, I became fascinated by this amazing animal. No other animal, except man, has adapted its surroundings to suit its needs as the beaver has. It is noted for its exceptional engineering skills in cutting down trees (as shown in the Canadian Banknote Company engraving at left), building canals to move logs, constructing lodges for shelter and protection against predators, and constructing dams to raise water levels and thus maintain underwater entrances to their lodges.

It is interesting that the North American beaver builds its lodge in the middle of a pond, but the Eurasian beaver builds its lodge along the banks.

The beaver is also known as a “keystone” species. When it builds its dams, large ponds and wetlands are created that in turn support a large variety of animals and plants. For this reason, where beavers are no longer present in former habitats, or are present in only small numbers, reintroductions have occurred.

Reintroductions began in in the late 1800s and continue to the present day. The most recent reintroduction has been in Scotland in 2009. (Beavers became extinct in Great Britain in the sixteenth century.) Reintroductions of beavers are being considered for Wales and England. Because of reintroductions, beaver populations have greatly increased in many Eurasian countries (to about 10,000 in France, 70,000 in Norway, 100,000 in Sweden, 200,000 in Russia, and so on).



Poster Stamp

One introduction of beavers had unfortunate results. In 1946, some beavers were introduced into Tierra del Fuego, an island at the tip of South America, in the hopes of starting a fur industry. But with beaver fur out of fashion by that date, a lack of many predators, and an abundance of food, the population increased rapidly to an estimated 250,000!

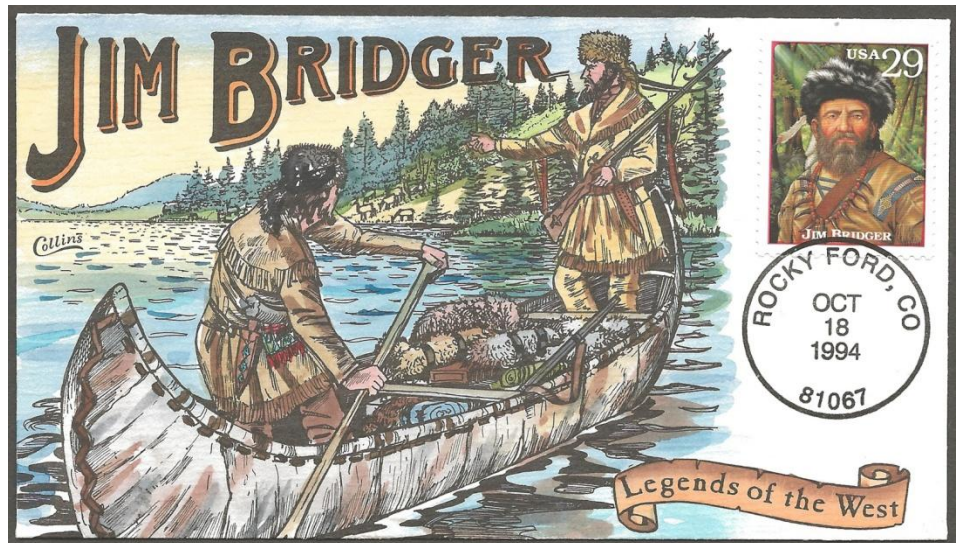
Beavers are especially adapted for their primarily aquatic lives. They are excellent swimmers, and can swim at 4 to 10 km/h (2.5 to 6 mph). A beaver usually stays underwater for two or three minutes, but can last for as long as 15. Beavers have a membrane that they can draw over the eye for protection while diving. The nostrils and ears can be closed for underwater swimming. Behind their incisors, beavers have inner lips that allow them to carry sticks in their mouths while swimming without getting a mouthful of water.



In addition to the fascinating physical adaptations, the beaver has tremendous historical significance. Until the 12th century, the Eurasian beaver was widely distributed across temperate Eurasia from the British Isles to Kamchatka, Russia, and as far south as Spain and Italy. But because of overhunting (for beaver pelts used in clothing and especially beaver hats), the beaver was essentially eliminated, except for a few small regions in France, Germany, Norway, Mongolia, Belarus, and Russia.

Because of this decline in the Eurasian beaver population, Europeans explored the eastern coast of North America, trading European goods with the First Nations people in exchange for beaver pelts, which were then shipped to Europe. Explorers such as Jacques Cartier, Champlain, La Salle, and Henry Hudson established fur-trading centers and routes, and explorers Lewis and Clark pushed further and further west, returning with news of Oregon's abundance of beavers.

Mountain men such as Jim Bridger soon followed. Two notable companies were formed: The Hudson's Bay Company, now known as the Bay, in what is now Canada (chartered in 1670 and one of the oldest commercial corporations in the world), and the American Fur Company formed by John Jacob Astor, who founded Fort Union in the Upper Missouri, a symbol of merchant power for nearly 40 years.



The fur-trading industry certainly played a significant role in the development of Canada and the United States. But by 1870, the fur trade slowly collapsed, mainly because silk hats had become more fashionable.

I have only touched on a few of the fascinating facts about beavers and my continuing interest in this amazing animal. I still look for interesting beaver items, and enjoy the challenges of collecting and exhibiting. The exhibit (it has been through three revisions) has been shown ten times in the United States and Canada, winning vermeil or gold awards as well as my most appreciated award—the most popular exhibit award, as judged by the viewing public, at ATA's national shows in 2007 and 2008.

I live on the shores of Georgian Bay in Canada and have seen beavers swimming by my shoreline. I have also seen the remaining stump when a beaver has cut down one of my poplars, but that is a whole other story.