



“Currents” March 2018

Are Beavers Found in the Guadalupe River?

If I ask you to conjure up an image of typical Hill Country wildlife, it might include white-tailed deer, armadillo, or a mockingbird. I doubt many would include beaver in this category, but maybe you should. The North American beaver is the largest rodent in the United States and requires water in the form of a pond, stream, lake, or river for survival. They can be found almost anywhere there's water, and, in fact, are found throughout most of Texas including here in our own backyard. UGRA receives several calls each year about tree damage or sightings of beavers along waterfront property.

Many are surprised to learn that beavers can be found in the headwaters of the Guadalupe River because they don't see the typical beaver dams or lodges associated with the furry engineers. In colder regions, beavers live in lodges made of sticks and mud and enter and leave them through underwater tunnels. They build dams to surround the lodge with water as a means of protection from predators and to keep the lodge entrance ice free. The area of impounded water also expands their access to trees while allowing these strong swimmers to remain close to the water. In contrast, southern beavers in Texas typically do not build dams or lodges and instead burrow into the banks of streams or lakes. Burrows examined in the Rio Grande in Big Bend were quite large; high enough to stand up in and about 30 feet long.

Don't mistake any aquatic rodent as a beaver, however. The exotic and invasive nutria are also found in the Guadalupe River, but their smaller size and round tail can help you to distinguish them from beavers.

Beavers feed on a variety of vegetation. In their northern range, the inner bark of willows and cottonwood are their mainstay. In central Texas, beavers utilize cottonwood, oak, elm, juniper, and pecan in the winter and rely heavily on Bermuda grass, beard grass, ragweed, and yellow water lily in the summer. However, they can and will eat the leaves, twigs, and bark of just about any species of woody plants that grows near the water. Many complaints received by UGRA involve damage from beavers gnawing on cypress and other riparian trees. You can protect your trees from this type of damage by wrapping them in hardware cloth.

Before we write the beaver off as a nuisance, it's important to understand the role they play in the environment. Their burrowing and harvesting activities maintain and create habitats for species that live in and around the river. Also, areas impounded by dams collect nutrients and sediments and have an impact on the ecosystem long after the beaver has abandoned the dam.

Have beavers always been found in this region? Lifelong Hill Country residents will say they don't recall seeing beavers in the headwaters of the Guadalupe River fifty years ago. Several factors may play a role in the increasing encounters with beavers in our area including migration associated with extended droughts, higher reproduction rates, lack of predation, and increased sightings from growing numbers of people in what once were unpopulated areas.

The next time you drive over the Guadalupe River, try to spot a small dark head moving swiftly above the water. You might be surprised how often you catch a glimpse of the North American beaver.

Let's Keep Our River Clean

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