

Messing About on Beaver Brook

Beaver Brook rises in the swamps of Boxborough, Massachusetts, and flows north-northeast for some ten miles before emptying into Forge Pond in the town of Westford. It's a quiet, sluggish brook, characterized in the main by tea-colored waters, narrow passages through overhanging trees, and, finally, toward the confluence with the pond, by extensive cattail marshes.

In this section, the stream meanders erratically through the marshes, curling along wooded banks, arching out again into the open grasses, curving and recurving back on itself so that, seen from overhead, it takes the form of a snake, slithering northward.

The interior of the marshes is a world apart, a grass-bound passage of slow waters, duckweed, and narrow green hallways, lined, in June and July, with head-high cattails, flowering forget-me-nots, willow herb, wild rice, spatterdock, and arrowhead. In some sections, the vegetation is so thick it blocks out all but a mere channel of blue sky. Ratty and Mole of *The Wind in the Willows* fame would have loved the place.

When I first started exploring Beaver Brook, there was no invasive loosestrife in the cattails, and the waters were deep and cool and periodically opened into round pools where huge snappers lurked. For the first mile, you had to paddle to and fro between high wooded banks, and the air was loud with the songs of marsh wrens and the calls of red-winged blackbirds and swamp sparrows. There were vast deep-throated grumblings from bullfrogs, banjolike twangs from the green frogs, and dark water snakes would periodically disappear into the grassy tangle. There were muskrats and painted turtles, herons and rails. And there were little bands of wood ducks and black ducks that would dash up in terror





whenever you rounded a bend, and then would land again around the next bend, as if out of sight were indeed out of mind.

A mile downstream from the Route 119 bridge, there is a narrow spot where, years past, a farm family in the area maintained a ford. Nowadays, only the heavy granite stones remain. Somewhere along these banks, perhaps near the ford, in the seventeenth century, a Pawtucket Indian named Tom Dublet had a fish weir. Dublet's father was killed by Mohawks at the weir in 1645, and Dublet himself lived somewhere along the brook until his death sometime around 1722. During King Philip's War, in 1675, he acted as a negotiator in the ransom of English captives.

Dublet and the subsequent English families who settled in the immediate area lived with a light touch on the natural environment of Beaver Brook. It

wasn't until recently that the marshes began to change dramatically. For one thing, loosestrife, the bane of cattail marshes here in New England, has started to move in. What's worse, a Westford builder constructed a housing development on the high ground on the east side of the brook so that, where once there was a wildwood of deep oaks and hickories, there are now glaring palaces.

Farther downstream, beyond a small timber bridge, the brook grows wild again. Here, in the open expanses of cattail, in informal turtle surveys I used to hold, my children and I once counted more than three hundred painted turtles in the space of a mile. Once we saw a wood turtle, a rare species in the state, on the banks by the bridge, and there were also spotted turtles in the area. I have seen the now-uncommon box turtles in nearby uplands, as well as great blue herons and green herons frequenting this section, and there have been nesting American bitterns, listed as endangered in Massachusetts. Nearby in vernal pools on the floodplain, researchers have recorded the endangered blue-spotted salamander and also the marbled, the most imperiled salamander in the state.

Beaver Brook is changing quickly, but has yet to be destroyed. The western banks are still wild. There are no developments and no nearby houses for nearly two miles; it's all woods, and vernal pools, and overgrown fields where foxes den and owls call by night. But developers have announced plans to reconstruct the timber bridge and begin building on the western banks, and if the permits are granted, to quote ecologist William Beebe in regard to extinction: "...another heaven and another earth must pass before such a one can be again."

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