

Beaver Buzz Brings Butterflies

Beavers are known to be the primary agents responsible for the creation and maintenance of natural habitats required by a number of plants and animals. Skillful at making ponds, selectively clearing vegetation, and industriously laboring to alter their local landscape, the direct effect of the engineering activities of beavers is the creation of open space habitats along streams.

Butterflies benefit from the activities of beavers. The St. Francis' Satyr butterfly, currently protected federally under the Endangered Species Act, is one of the rarest butterflies in North America. Saint Francis' satyr was reported to have been extinct until the species was rediscovered in 1992. The removal of the beaver may have been the greatest factor in the reduction of the butterfly's population.

Beavers open up habitat for butterflies along streams - they create openings in the river forest vegetation; they disrupt the succession of vegetation growth that is unsuitable for butterfly habitat; and they create wetland habitat through their beaver engineering skills. These activities, subsequently, influence the distribution of butterflies on the local and regional levels.

Beavers create ponds and canals so they can move about to access food sources and gather building materials for their homes. In the process, they selectively eliminate woody vegetation. As areas open up, and beaver food sources become increasingly distant or scarce, beavers begin to abandon sections of their range. In time, the abandoned sections drain and parts of those sections become suitable habitat for plants that attract butterflies.

The optimal conditions for butterflies do not remain constant, however. Beaver meadows typically succeed to shrubs and woody vegetation within 3-5 years. The woody plants crowd out the vegetation growth that butterflies need to subsist. Thus the landscape transitions from beaver-occupied areas, to beaver-abandoned / butterfly-occupied areas, to areas of juvenile woody vegetation occupied by neither beavers nor butterflies, to mature woody areas that once again become interesting to beavers.

The regional mosaic mixture of landscape areas that are undergoing a succession of vegetation is accompanied by a fluctuation in the presence of a variety of animal species. The beaver holds significant responsibility for influencing this shifting mosaic landscape. And the shifting landscape, accordingly assures the continued viability of butterflies.

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