

---

Despite its humble appearance, the industrious and plucky rodent has come to represent Canadian values of hard work and perseverance.



Canada's symbol BY VIRGINIA L. DAKINIEWICH

### **Beaver - Canada's Symbol**

We commemorate the beaver as a national symbol on our stamps, coins and emblems. Hundreds of Canadian towns, lakes, and rivers bear the name of this familiar buck toothed animal. In comparison to the American eagle or Russian bear, the beaver may not be the most glorious animal symbol for our country. Despite its humble appearance, the industrious and plucky rodent has come to represent Canadian values of hard work and perseverance. Although we are well known for the rich variety of our wildlife, it was the beaver's durable fur that provided the impetus for much of the North American fur trade and was a major motivation for the exploration of Canada.

### **Some Beaver Facts**

Beavers are the largest rodents in North America and the third largest in the entire world.

The beaver's eyes are covered by a membrane which allows the beaver to see underwater. The nostrils and ears are also sealed while submerged.

They are excellent swimmers and are able to remain submerged for up to 15 minutes.

The flat, scaly tail is used to signal danger and also serves as a source of fat storage.

Beaver ponds also provide habitat for waterfowl, fish and other aquatic animals. Their dams help reduce soil erosion and can help reduce flooding.

Beavers usually mate for life. The young beaver "kits" typically remain with their parents for up to two years

The average lifespan of a beaver in the wild is 10 to 20 years.

The beaver's fur is a double coat made up short fine inner hairs and long, coarse outer hairs. The fur is usually dark brown. The beaver waterproofs its fur with an oily substance known as castoreum, secreted by scent glands.

*(Wikipedia)*

The discovery of the beaver dovetailed with the discovery of Canada. In 1534 Jacques Cartier sailed from France seeking the Northwest Passage to the Orient. He landed on the rocky shores of Labrador and continued his journey, stopping at the Gaspé Peninsula in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. There he claimed the land for France and traded furs with the Indians of the Gaspé.

By the late sixteenth century, the beaver was extinct in Western Europe and was close to extinction in Scandinavia and Russia. The fashionable people in Europe all wanted beaver skin felt hats so the New World soon became a source for the sought-after beaver pelts. The soft undercoat of the beaver was a superior material for felting hats, the strands of which had tiny barbs that made them mat together tightly. By the late 1600s, nearly 100,000 beaver pelts were traded annually. The beaver had been trapped close to extinction by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Luckily for the hard-working rodent, silk velour was found to be less expensive yet just as stylish and the demand for beaver pelts began to subside.

In 1673 the governor of New France, Count Frontenac suggested to royal authorities that the beaver was an appropriate symbol for the new colony. In 1678, the Hudson's Bay Company recognized the importance of the beaver and began to use arms bearing four beavers on a shield. In 1851, railway builder Sir Sandford Fleming designed Canada's first postage stamp, the Threepenny Beaver, assuring the beaver a position as a distinctly Canadian emblem. The beaver is still seen on the crest of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company.

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1975, an "act to provide for the recognition of the beaver (*castor canadensis*) as a symbol of the sovereignty of Canada" received royal assent. This act granted the beaver official status as an emblem of Canada. (*Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada*)

Today, the beaver population has rebounded although not to pre-fur trade numbers. They are acknowledged as a keystone species in an ecological community, second only to humans in their ability to manipulate and change their environment. The beaver is a distinctly Canadian symbol, unpretentious, hardworking and durable. Who would have imagined that a semi-aquatic rodent with a luxuriant coat would play such a vital role in Canada's history and the development of North America?