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THE MOUNTAIN BEAVER IS NOT A BEAVER

The western part of Oregon is the home of a peculiar and little known animal called the mountain beaver. The only resemblance between this animal and the common beaver is that they both wear fur coats. From a structural standpoint, some scientists place the mountain beaver between the porcupine and the marmot, or groundhog. It is more like a large gopher because it burrows in the ground, piling up the dirt at the entrance. The burrow is from six to ten inches in diameter. For some reason, the mountain beaver is almost tailless because there is merely a tuft of hair where the tail should be.

If you want another name for this animal, you have to take the one used by the Indians when Lewis and Clark first visited the tribes along the Columbia. It was called Sewellel or Showt'l. Naturalists have never been able to figure out its ancestry or how it should be classified in relation to other mammals. The point is, there are no relatives. The family is distinct and more than that, it is found nowhere in America except in the coastal belt from Northern California to Washington. It is a curious survival of past ages, a primitive type, an isolated species that held over from geological times. So the Pacific Northwest has something not found elsewhere.

In 1804 and 1805 when Lewis and Clark were exploring the Oregon country, the Indians brought in robes made by sewing a number of skins together. The explorers noticed that each of these skins lacked a tail. They were not the skins of the regular beaver which at that time was used as a medium of exchange. The name of the animal used by the Indians told nothing so the first time it was ever recorded in literature, it was set down as a species of squirrel.

One of the reasons why the mountain beaver is unknown to most people is that he never comes out in the daytime. There are colonies in the woods around Portland and along the Willamette River, as a rule near water although the animal doesn't take to water like a real beaver. It likes to burrow where the ground is loose and damp but especially where the vegetation is thick and the holes are hidden in the grass and bushes. Colonies have been seen at Milwaukie, Jennings Lodge, Mount Tabor and through the Coast Range and Cascades.

In the summer time, one may find where this animal cuts grasses and twigs and lays them out to dry or cure before taking them into the burrow. In this respect it is like the cony that dries and stores up its food for winter. Little is known about the life of the Showt'l. It may hibernate and sleep away most of the winter, especially where it lives in the Cascade Mountains and the ground is covered with snow.

One that was kept in captivity became very tame within a few days, would sit up and wash its whiskered face and take tender ends of ferns and other plants from the hand as if it had no fear. It has small, bright eyes, long claws, brown fur and long, sharp front teeth.