

HOW THE BEAVER LOST ITS TAIL

How the Beaver Got His Tail

When Kluskap was in Cape Breton, he obtained a canoe. He had such power that he took for this purpose a big stone which is now at St. Peters, Cape Breton, and resembles a canoe with a person in the middle and a paddle alongside him. He went to the Bras d'Or lakes. He saw a beaver and a muskrat. The muskrat had a tail like a paddle, the beaver had a poor round tail. Kluskap said to him, "That tail does not suit you—it is too small." He asked Muskrat, "Will you exchange?" "Yes." Kluskap took the tail off Muskrat and gave it to Beaver. "This will make you strong." He gave the other tail to Muskrat: "This will suit you. It is just your size." Beaver had a wigwam in the water, and a little poplar tree about twenty yards from the water. Beaver started out with the tail he had gotten from Muskrat, went to the poplar, stood on two legs to bite it, and cut it down. He gnawed first high, then lower. The big tail he had procured held him up like a third leg. But Muskrat merely watches and dives quickly. Kluskap had so much power that he could do anything he wanted to do. (Wallis and Wallis 1955:329)

While this story may just seem whimsical, it appears to describe an ancient species in Mi'kma'ki. Up until somewhere around 8,000 years ago, Giant beavers (*Castorides ohioensis*) weighing up to 200kg roamed North America—part of the "megafauna" of the last ice age glaciation. The curious thing about these beavers is that they had tails like muskrats (rounded) rather than the wide, flat beaver tails we know of today (*Castorides canadiensis*). This story appears to reflect the distinction of these two creatures. In addition, there is ecological evidence that giant beaver and muskrat shared habitats. There are only three fossils of the Giant beavers known from Canada—one in Passamquoddy Bay. Also, many of the Kluskap stories include "giant" beaver, named as such.



Weighing up to 200kg (!), the Giant beaver (*Castorides ohioensis*) had a long round tail, rather than the flat tail of today's North American beaver. Different species, both Giant beavers and North American beavers shared habitat with each other and the muskrat.



Muskrat, whose tail resembles that of the Giant beaver (*Castorides ohioensis*).



Today's North American beaver (*Castorides canadiensis*), with a wide flat tail.