

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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Last week we took a closer look at an excellent swimmer of the prairie pothole region, the muskrat. Native to North America, its name is derived from the Algonquian word *musquash*. Many Native Americans hold muskrats in high esteem and respect. Tribes with Muskrat Clans include the Chippewa and Menominee.

The muskrat plays an important role in several Native American mythologies, including this creation story from the Blackfoot people. "In the beginning, all the world was water. One day the Old Man, also called *Napi*, was curious to find out what might be beneath the water. So he sent animals to dive beneath the surface. First Duck, then Otter, then Badger dived in vain. The Old Man then sent Muskrat diving to the depths. After a long time, Muskrat rose to the surface holding between his paws a little ball of mud. The Old Man blew upon it. The mud began to swell, growing larger and larger, until it became the whole earth."

I'll close with the Maliseet legend "The Tail Trade."

Long ago, when the world was new, Beaver had a long, thin tail. He loved to dive, but his long tail didn't help him get to the bottom of the pond fast enough. He couldn't use his tail to slap the mud into place when he built a dam.

One day, Muskrat swam by. Beaver noticed Muskrat's broad, flat tail. He realized it would be perfect for diving and building dams. At the same time, Muskrat gazed enviously at Beaver's tail. Muskrat loved to swim fast, and his broad, flat tail dragged in the water and slowed him down. He thought it would be better to have Beaver's tail. So Muskrat said, "Beaver, I would do anything to have a tail like yours."

"Is that so?" replied Beaver. "I was just admiring *your* tail. Why don't we trade?"

Muskrat eagerly agreed, and they exchanged tails right then and there. Muskrat couldn't wait to try his new long, thin tail. He was pleased as could be when he shot across the pond with great speed. Then he watched as Beaver showed off *his* new tricks. Beaver easily dove to the bottom of the pond with his new broad, flat tail. He gathered some mud, swam up, and with a loud *smack!* slapped it onto his dam. When he felt danger was nearby, a loud *smack!* would be heard as Beaver slapped his tail on the water.



Muskrat was jealous. He had never even dreamed of the clever ways Beaver had thought to use the broad, flat tail. Muskrat went to Beaver and said, "I want my tail back!" Beaver wasn't about to give it up. His only answer was a loud *smack!*

Muskrat knew better than to ask again. To this day, Beaver still has the broad, flat tail he got from Muskrat, and Muskrat has the long, thin one he got from Beaver.

As Aesop and my mom would have said, perhaps Muskrat should have "Let well enough alone."