

Of Moose and Men

For many men, as is undoubtedly the case for a fair number of women, there seems to be a primordial instinct to hunt, and in this case, I'm not talking about harvesting a sale item at Nordstroms. From the day I first cocked the lever on my Daisy BB gun, I have been overwhelmed by an insatiable urge to hunt. During those times when shooting honeybees off of dandelions became too boring (or too dangerous - that's another story), I would challenge my younger sister to run across the lawn while I practiced my skills at a moving target. To fuel this passion even further, I grew up in a part of the country where real men carried their guns on a rack in their pickup, with their best friend in the front seat and their wife sitting on the fender-well in the bed of the truck. It should really come as no surprise then that upon settling in a state where wildlife abounds, I felt like I had moved from the land of milk and honey right on into heaven.

For the first year in Alaska, there was no big-game hunting in my life due to residency requirements, which made for a long fall. In some strange sense, I just didn't feel like a real man, but I knew time would change all of that. Finally, the day came where I could walk up to the sporting goods store, proudly claim residency, and purchase a little yellow piece of paper that rightfully established this transplant as an Alaskan man. I soon began inquiring about where people did their hunting - I mean come on there were all kinds of moose right in my back yard, how hard was this going to be anyway (I had already harvested 5 king salmon from the Kasilof River, as had my wife, so I was ready for some different action). I soon



learned that many so-called hunters in this state jumped in a plane and paid the pilot a sum of money equivalent to a about a year's salary where I had come from. This was my first sense of Alaskan culture shock. I guess I would just have to show them how an Idaho spud did things.

At the end of my first year of hunting I quit counting how many cow moose I had encountered when the number reached 100, but there was not one bull in the whole bunch. Down in spud country it was quite common for brothers to fill their sister's deer tags, so I concluded that there must be a lot of families with sisters in this part of the state because I couldn't believe I didn't see a male moose all year. However, just being out hunting again had increased my testosterone to a high enough level that I could withstand this one season without a rack on the hood of my pickup truck. The really hard part came when year two and three produced the same results. It was a low point in my life. I began avoiding people who were talking about their successful hunting trips. I couldn't even accompany my wife to the meat counter at Safeways, in fact, it got so bad that I seriously thought about taking up figure skating.

Not being the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, it finally dawned on me that perhaps a change in plans was in order. So, the next year I decided to take a canoe trip down the Swanson River. I had heard of many people's successful



hunts in this watershed and the way I figured it, I could at least blame a meatless hunt on the fact that my kill was taken away by attacking brown bears. September 1 finally arrived, and after loading the canoe, my partner, Steve, and I stepped back and wondered if the load would make it under a couple of the bridges on the trip. You sure can get a lot in a canoe. It was a very interesting trip downriver. We must have hit every rock and other obstacle in our path, which led me to keep asking about my partner's eyesight (which by the way is a common malady of all my canoe-mates - Steve, Jim, Rene, Joel, and finally Arnie). I finally had to quit being so inquisitive when he told me something about a paddle and a place where the sun didn't shine. So, when we finally chose a site to call camp, it was none too soon. We quickly set out on unloading the canoe and hauling the tonnage to the camp

site. That's when it dawned on us. "Hey Steve, I thought you were bringing the tent." "No way," he replied, "you said you were bringing one." I guess it didn't really matter though, because we had 50 x ½ gallon milk cartons full of Lea's famous stew. If it started raining too hard, we'd just cover ourselves with empty milk cartons.

After a few days of hunting in the new area, with the cow count once again approaching triple digits, my patience had reached critical mass. How was I going to make up a story to cover this fiasco? How could I call back home to spud-land and tell my brother and mother that I was trying out for Olympic ice-dancing? I was contemplating all of these mind-numbing thoughts as I ended another day of hunting, when I stumbled across a pile of bones. It seems that I had come upon the remains of an old moose who probably died of starvation the previous winter. I was sorting through the mess of squirrel-strewn bone, when I uncovered a scapula, which is part of the shoulder. I had listened to a tape earlier that year, one put out by the Alaska Bowhunting Association, and they had referred to the scapula as an effective moose calling tool. The tape was also full of sounds similar to the ones I made during a long trip to the bathroom. Right there it hit me. I was desperate enough to try anything. So, I took the scapula, walked over to some alders, and scraped and banged and scraped and banged and then let out of those sounds that you usually have to follow with, "excuse me." It was nearly dark and I was glad because I sure felt foolish. I didn't have very much time to ponder how low I had stooped to bag a moose when not more than 100 feet away there came a noise that suddenly had my heart pounding. Something was grunting and snorting, and from the way the brush and trees were moving in that area, this thing must have been huge. Up came my scope and I mean to tell you, I could see these great big things that looked like antlers and they were definitely having battle with the local shrubbery. Then this beast turned and trotted off over a hill down into some more thick brush. I quickly made my way to the crest of the hill and observed what turned out to be a

large bull moose that had just walked into a little clearing about a 100 yards away. Then, on cue, he turned broadside and looked right back at me. A new rule about antler size was only a couple of years old and I was not prepared to judge whether or not this was a legal bull. It had now become dark enough that through my scope I could not detect how many brow tines this bull had, but now that I am an expert (what a joke) I can tell you I was looking at a rack that was well over 60 inches and probably pretty close to 65 inches in breadth. But, darkness won this battle as I just stood there for about five minutes, staring, slobbering, shaking, pretty much in awe of what had just occurred. How many other bull moose had I walked by in the past three or four years? Amazing! When I finally made it back to camp, Steve had a bonfire going trying to heat up 5 or 6 gallons of stew. "What's that hanging from your belt," he asked me. "This," I said, "is going to help save us from the men's synchronized swim team." I grabbed my bowl (a five gallon bucket) full of stew and relayed to Steve all that had happened. I think he had become too jaded to believe me, so after finishing our stew we retired to our sleeping bags where I commenced practicing my moose calling.

When morning came, we decided to hunt opposite sides of the river (I think Steve was too ashamed to be near me), and I wasn't ready yet to try my newfound skill in front of another human. This turned out to be one of those mornings that hunters love. It was clear and cold, and there was absolutely no wind. Moreover, there was a low level fog hugging the ground. I hiked to an area that had appeared to have been a swamp at one time, but was now littered with little patches of alder and birch. Before I could even work up enough courage to start moaning or to scrape the brush, I could hear multiple moose grunting and bawling and scraping. Man, this was way cool. I scraped some nearby brush with my scapula and tried to imitate the sounds I was hearing. It must have worked because a few minutes later a large moose walked right out into a small clearing, stood there in the fog, while looking at me as he emitted this grunting noise. He would lower his nose to the ground, root

up some moss, and then raise his head and look at me and let out another grunt. I counted five brow tines on one side, but had to wait what seemed like a couple of years for him to finally move so I could make my shot. Even though I had grown up as a juvenile delinquent with my BB gun, reducing the local bird and frog populations, I never had grown fond of or accustomed to the actual killing aspect of hunting big game. I realize it is a necessary part of the experience, but for me it is not the part I enjoy. Therefore, I have a little ritual, as do many hunters, where upon walking up to the kill site, I always kneel on the ground, and pray a prayer of thanks to God for His provision. I hunt for the meat and believe the Bible lays out a very clear statement that these animals were created for us to wisely use. After my prayer, I stood up and said out loud, "what have I done." I knew my partner and I were in for a workout. I cut the jugular and quickly headed back for camp, as Steve and I had a pact that stated we would meet there whenever either one of us made a shot. After striding into camp, I informed Steve he was going to need every bit of last night's stew.



A few hours later, we had 7 game-bags filled with meat and a 52" rack, all flagged with orange ribbon, ready for the trip back to camp. We both grabbed a hind quarter (still attached to the bone) and tied them down to our packs. I laid down on my pack, got my arms under both the shoulder straps, rolled over, then slowly stood up. It was not a pretty sight. My feet were sinking into the tundra. I told Steve it must have been the stew. About that time, he had got his load off the ground and was in a crouching position, kind of like a weight lifter ready to do battle with the barbell. Slowly he stood up and in slow motion, just like a tree that has been cut with a saw, back down to the ground he went, backwards, feet sticking straight up in the air. I couldn't take it. I had to turn my head because the tears were running down my cheek. This moose wasn't going to give up without a battle. He tried one more time, but only got to his knees this

time before tumbling over onto his side. He grumbled something about being too old for this stuff as he untied the bag of meat and put on one of the front quarters. By the end of the day we had the meat back to the river in a nice cool spot. The 5 gallons of stew for supper found us ready for bed.

The next morning we took the canoe across the river to where the meat was located. We pulled the vessel up onto the bank and began carefully loading the bags of meat. When it was all perfectly situated we slowly slid the aluminum craft back into the water. There was only one problem. The angle of the bank was steep enough that when the canoe started to slide we couldn't stop it and the next thing you know our canoe, moose meat, and flagged antlers were staring up at us from about six feet deep. Steve and I turned toward each and said in unison, "not me." Due to my youth and stupidity, I was the one who ended up in the river wearing only my long-johns for comfort. I'd hold my breath and make the dive down to the canoe and then kind of crawl up the bank shoving a wet load of meat ahead of me. It wasn't the happiest time of my life, but as I look back on it now, it's hard to keep a grin off my face. Conducting a river salvage operation for moose meat isn't what I had envisioned when I moved to Alaska.

Once back on our side of the river, the meat had to be hung and air-dried. We sat around the camp fire with our buckets of stew - they sure tasted better than the previous evening - reminiscing about the day's events. We both decided that on the next trip we would bring scuba gear and a bigger canoe. When we retired to our bags for the night, while looking up at the stars, I heard Steve roll over and say, "listen to this call." It felt good to be a real man again.

