

ALASKA PENINS

Trophy management challenge



Leonard Lee Rue III photo

BIG BULL—Alaska Peninsula is prime area for production of trophy-class moose.

ULA MOOSE

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A WORLD record moose is alive and well and probably living on the Alaska Peninsula. Studies by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game show the Peninsula produces a five-year-old moose with 60-inch antlers (scoring 200+ Boone and Crockett points). No other area of the world, without restrictive permit hunting, equals or surpasses this growth rate.

Moose arrived on the Peninsula in the early 1900s. They came through the Lake Clark-Lake Iliamna area as Interior populations extended their range and continued along the Peninsula until today they have reached the Port Moller area. Department records on Peninsula moose begin with Statehood and show that the herd was then producing 33 calves per 100 cows with about 25 per cent twins. This rate continued through 1969. After 1970, reproduction declined sharply, and now averages only 12 calves per 100 cows with the incidence of twins down to about seven per cent. Many possibilities for this decline have been suggested, but there exists no conclusive evidence of the cause or causes. The best possibility is that the winter range has declined in both quantity and quality. This deteriorated range cannot adequately maintain pregnant cows, and they abort or have small, weak calves which are highly susceptible to disease and predation.

Range deterioration and the subsequent reproductive decline have resulted in a smaller herd size at a time of increasing human demands. In 1969, 527 hunters took 393 moose; by 1973, the hunters had approximately doubled to 1,175, with a harvest of 839. For this same period the bull ratio went from 53.9 per 100 cows to 30.5 per 100 cows.

The Department of Fish and Game recognizes that many hunters want large antlered moose and that areas for such hunting require special consideration. The Alaska Peninsula has been a prime area for this type of hunter. If production of trophy-class animals is to continue, management changes must be made and in response to the increasing hunting pressure and declining bull-cow ratio, regulations were effected attempting to reduce the bull harvest. Prior to 1968, the bag limit was two moose. The 1970 bag limit remained at two moose, but only one could be an antlered bull and bulls could not be taken in October.

In 1974, the bag limit was reduced to one moose and a ban on the taking of big game the same day the hunter was airborne was implemented. The 1974 harvest was 705 moose, of which 520 were bulls — a decline of only 87 bulls from the previous year.

The department's harvest ticket program shows that about one half of the bull harvest occurs in the first 30 days of the season. Hunter contacts during this period indicate that most of the animals are taken by meat hunters. Harvesting of young bulls conflicts with trophy management because these young bulls will never attain large antler growth necessary to satisfy the trophy demand in future years. As a result the department recommended a reduced bull season for 1975 with a liberal antlerless season to provide for the meat hunter. This proposal was approved by the Board of Fish and Game, but its effectiveness was nullified by passage of Senate Bill No. 230 prohibiting the taking of antlerless moose in 1975.

Many pitfalls lay ahead for trophy moose management. The transfer of public land to private ownership will cause difficulties, particularly with hunter access. Thus, although the overall harvest may remain within desired levels, that harvest may be concentrated in the few areas permitting public access. Oil exploration is continuing on the Alaska Peninsula. If production becomes a reality, it could displace moose and has the potential of altering critically needed habitat. Designating an area for special consideration (trophy management) tends to attract attention and increased public use that can be detrimental to the management goals.

While trophy hunting is well-established, trophy management involves relatively new principles that are difficult for some people to accept. If it becomes a reality, it must have public support. Above all else, it must be remembered that the game resources of Alaska belong to the people and they will determine what role wildlife will play in our lives. ●

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