



The Incredible Viewable Moose

by Dave Kelleyhouse

Moose may be the most viewable of all big game animals in Alaska. They are widely distributed throughout the road-connected portion of the state, they are quite abundant south of the Alaska Range, and they often frequent open areas in the summer. On top of all this, moose are truly huge and easy to spot. Old bulls have tipped the scales at over 1,500 pounds, and even the relatively petite cows can weigh over half a ton.

Your best opportunity to see a moose in the summer months is when the beasts slip into one of Alaska's roadside ponds for a fresh salad of aquatic plants. Morning and evening hours are the best, because moose spend most mid-day hours bedded in thick vegetation.

When you do see a moose, resist the urge to approach too closely. Bull moose tend to be very short-tempered during the fall rut in late September and October, but cows are consistently more dangerous. In the summer, cow moose are often accompanied by small, cinnamon-colored calves, which they commonly leave hidden while they feed. Cow moose are extremely protective of their calves and will not hesitate to confront wolves, black or grizzly bears, or even a pushy person if they feel their calves are being threatened. Unlike bears, moose seldom bluff-charge, and a swift kick from one of those sharp, heavy hooves can be fatal. The best course of action is to view and photograph moose from a distance or from the safety of a vehicle.

The best areas to view moose are generally south of the Alaska Range and can be reached via the Tok Cutoff, Glenn, Richardson, Parks, and Seward Highways. Good bets are the

Eagle River area near the end of Eagle River Road and almost anywhere on the Kenai Peninsula. If you will be spending most of your time north of the Alaska Range in the Interior, try the Alaska Highway, the Steese, Elliott, and Dalton Highways, and the northern segments of the Tok Cutoff, Richardson, and Parks Highways. The Mineral Lakes area south of Tok, the Donnelly Dome area south of Delta Junction, or the Chena Hot Springs area east of Fairbanks would be good choices.

Fishing and moose viewing can go pleasantly hand-in-hand. Once, while fighting a large northern pike in a shallow, weedy bay of George Lake southeast of Delta Junction, I heard water splashing behind where I sat in the canoe. To my surprise, a large bull moose with massive antlers still in velvet stood looking down at me only a few yards away. I continued fishing, he began eating his pond salad, and we kept each other entertained for the next hour or so. I've encountered moose quite commonly over the years while camping and boating on Alaskan lakes and rivers in quest of more slippery tablefare.

A pleasant combination trip can be made by flying into a remote fishing lake in good moose country for a day or two. Many air charter companies maintain cabins and boats on such lakes for the convenience of their clients. Nothing is quite so pleasant as grilling fresh pike or lake trout fillets over a crackling fire while watching a moose feeding belly deep in the lake. Summer float trips down many of Alaska's premier arctic grayling, salmon, or trout streams can reward you with moose viewing opportunities in addition to some unforgettable fishing and rafting adventures. There are many do-it-yourself trips, or you may choose to go with an experienced Alaskan river guide.

WILDLIFE VIEWING

MOOSE

During late August and early September, many moose begin migrating toward their fall and early winter ranges, which can be as far as 75 miles from their summer range. In eastern interior Alaska, this movement is generally from lowland marshy areas to mountainous areas, but in other areas it may vary. Such fall movements often take moose across Alaska's highways and along major rivers where you may catch a glimpse of them.

If you want to view moose during the month of September in most of Alaska, you can plan on having hunters present if you are outside of national parks or other areas closed to moose hunting. Moose seasons generally open around the first of September and remain open throughout most of the month. Moose meat is a staple tablefare and many Alaskans hunt moose each fall. At this time of year you may want to visit Denali National Park to view moose so that neither you nor the moose will be disturbed.

One big advantage to viewing moose in the fall is that they will often respond to a call imitating a challenging bull or a receptive cow. While bulls will begin grunting in some areas as early as September 1, they really get serious after the middle of the month. Cows start vocalizing commonly in late September. If you are in good moose country, listen carefully very early and very late in the day for the deep, guttural challenges of bulls or for the nasal wailing of the cows. Then, simply try to imitate those sounds yourself. Sometimes, all you need to do to call in a bull moose is to vigorously rake a shed antler, an old moose shoulder blade, or even a dead stick against a small spruce tree. You should be careful when calling moose, because bull moose can get all worked up while coming in to you and they are spoiling for a fight. When calling works, it is almost always exciting.

Moose viewing can also be rewarding in the winter as moose begin to concentrate in patches of tall willows along frozen rivers and streams. The absence, presence, and abundance of fresh moose tracks in the snow will tip you off as to your chances of seeing a moose. Large bulls begin dropping their antlers in November while small bulls may keep their antlers until later in the winter. All moose can become very intolerant of disturbance during winters of exceptionally deep snow, so again do not attempt to approach them too closely under these conditions. Excellent winter moose viewing may be experienced by riding the Alaska Railroad train between Fairbanks and Anchorage, particularly during late winter.

Certain habitats are better for viewing moose than others. Some of the best habitat for moose develops 10 to 20 years

following a forest fire. Little food for moose exists in the shade of old spruce forests, but forest fires set the stage for vigorous young growth. Willows, birch, and aspen saplings soon become abundant in burned-over areas and are highly palatable to moose. Prime areas such as this may be found along the Taylor Highway north of Tok, the Tok Cutoff south of Tok, the Alaska Highway near Delta, and on the Kenai Peninsula. I have observed moose feeding in burned areas during every month of the year and such areas are good places to watch for them. During September, high country areas near timberline where shrubby willows are abundant hold many moose. Moose concentrate in such areas during the fall rut.

If all else fails, consider taking a short sight-seeing trip with one of Alaska's many air charter companies. An early morning or late evening flight could reward you with a bird's-eye look at many moose and possibly even Dall sheep, caribou, and bear during a single flight in some areas. Be sure to tell the pilot what you want to see and ask him for an honest appraisal of your chances. Bush pilots spend a great deal of time looking at wildlife and usually have a pretty good idea of where to take you to see specific kinds of animals. Expect to pay from \$120 to \$200 per hour of flight time, depending on the size of the aircraft.

No matter how or when you plan to look for moose, a good pair of binoculars will help a great deal. A powerful spotting scope and a tripod could also come in handy. For good pictures of moose, a 35mm camera equipped with a telephoto lens will be invaluable. Because moose are seen more commonly early and late in the day when light can be dim, consider packing along film with a high ASA number. Last, but not least, don't forget to bring along some good insect repellent anytime from late May through September. Alaska's legendary mosquitos, gnats, white-socks, and no-see-ums can drive you absolutely crazy anywhere, but they seem to thrive in low marshy areas commonly frequented by moose in the summer.

Unless your stay is extremely short and is spent exclusively in Anchorage parking lots, chances are that you will have an opportunity to see and photograph a moose in Alaska. Although the moose probably will never win any beauty contests, it is a truly awesome animal which plays a big part in the ecology and folklore of the state.

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