

Moose

The **moose** (*Alces alces*) is the world's largest member of the deer family. The Alaska-Yukon race (*Alces alces gigas*) is the largest of all the moose. Moose are generally associated with northern forests around the globe in North America, Europe, and Russia. In Europe they are called "elk." In Alaska, they occur in suitable habitat from the Unuk River in the Southeast Panhandle to the Colville River on the Arctic Slope. They are most abundant in recently burned areas that have propagated dense stands of willow, aspen and birch shrubs, on timberline plateaus, and along the major rivers of Southcentral and Interior Alaska.

General description: Moose are long-legged and heavy bodied with a drooping nose, a fold of hair-covered skin called a "dewlap" or "bell" under the chin, and a short tail. Their color ranges from golden brown to almost black, depending upon the season and the age of the animal. The hair of newborn calves is generally red-brown fading to a lighter rust color within a few weeks. By late summer, calves have shed their rust colored coat which is replaced with hair that is similar in texture and color to that of adults. Adult males are larger than the females and in prime condition weigh from 1,200 to 1,600 pounds (542 to 725 kg). Adult females weigh 800 to 1,300 pounds (364 to 591 kg).

Only the males or "bulls" have antlers. Most male calves develop a hair-covered, bony protuberance by the end of summer that persists through their first year. Following this initial development, antlers are grown each summer and shed during winter throughout the bull's life. The largest moose antlers in North America come from Alaska, the Yukon Territory, and the Northwest Territories of Canada. Trophy age class bulls with antlers 50 inches (127 cm) in spread or larger are found throughout Alaska. Moose occasionally produce trophy-size antlers when they are 6 or 7 years old, with the largest antlers grown at approximately 10 to 12 years of age.

Moose communicate through a variety of vocalizations, noises, body posturing, and odors. Moose rarely live more than 16 years.

Life history: Growth patterns, age at sexual maturity, and production of offspring are closely tied to range conditions. Female or "cow" moose generally breed at 28 months, though some may breed as young as 16 months. Calves are born any time from mid-May to early June after a gestation period of about 230 days. A cow moose defends her newborn calf vigorously. Cows give birth to twins <10 to 75 percent of the time, and triplets may occur. Newborn calves generally weigh 28 to 35 pounds (13-16 kg) and rarely as much as 45 pounds (22 kg). Calves begin nursing within the first few hours following birth and take solid food a few days later. During their first 5 months, while suckling and foraging, calves will grow to more than 10 times their birth mass; occasionally weighing more than 500 pounds (227 kg). Calves are generally weaned in the fall at the time the mother is breeding again.

The maternal bond is generally maintained until calves are 12 months old at which time the mother aggressively chases her offspring from the immediate area just before she gives birth. Moose breed in the fall with the peak of the "rut" activities coming in late September and early October. Adult males joust during the rut by bringing their antlers together and pushing. Serious battles are rare, but bulls regularly receive a few punctures, sometimes break ribs, and occasionally die from their wounds. The winner usually mates with several females.

By late October, adult males have exhausted their summer accumulation of fat and their desire for female company. Once again they begin feeding. Antlers from mature bulls are shed as early as November, but mostly in December and January. Young bulls may be seen with their antlers as late as April.

Food habits: During fall and winter, moose consume large quantities of willow, birch, and aspen twigs. In some areas, moose actually establish a "hedge" or browse line 6 to 8 feet above the ground by clipping most of the terminal shoots of favored food species. Spring is the time of grazing as well as browsing. Moose eat a variety of foods, particularly sedges, equisetum (horsetail), pond weeds, and grasses. During summer, moose feed on vegetation in shallow ponds, forbs, and the leaves of birch, willow, and aspen.

Movements: Most moose make seasonal movements to calving, rutting, and wintering areas. They travel anywhere from only a few miles to as many as 60 miles during these transitions.

Population dynamics: Moose have a high reproductive potential and can quickly overpopulate a range if not limited by predation, hunting, and severe weather. Deep crusted snow can lead to malnutrition and subsequent death of hundreds of moose and decrease the survival of the succeeding year's calves.

Moose are killed by wolves, black and brown bears. Black bears take moose calves in May and June. Brown bears kill calves and adults the entire time the bears are out of their winter dens. Wolves kill moose throughout the year. Predation limits the growth of many moose populations in Alaska.

Economic and future status: Because moose range over so much of Alaska, they have played an important role in the development of the state. At one time professional hunters supplied moose meat to mining camps. Historically, moose were an important source of food, clothing, and implements to Athapaskan Indians dwelling along the major rivers. Today, more people hunt moose than any other of Alaska's big game species. Alaskans and nonresidents annually harvest approximately 6,000 to 8,000 moose, some 3.5 million pounds of meat. Moose are an important part of the Alaskan landscape, and tourists photograph those animals that feed along the highway.

Human developments in Alaska include many alterations upon the face of the land. These activities create conflicts between people and moose as moose eat crops, stand on airfields, eat young trees, wander the city streets, and collide with cars and trains.

Removal of mature timber through logging and careless use of fire has, in general, benefited moose as new stands of young timber have created vast areas of high-quality moose food. The future for moose is reasonably bright, however, moose management has become increasingly complex as the allocation dilemma has intensified. Agencies are challenged to develop socially responsive plans that recognize and accommodate diverse uses and values for moose.

Text: Robert A Rausch, Bill Gasaway and Charles Schwartz

Illustration: Ashley A. Dean

Revised by John and Stacy Crouse and reprinted 2008

