



TROPHY OR MEAT ? a moose question

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“KILL A COW! That’s the same as killing 25 moose,” he snapped irately. The man was an Alaskan guide on an early season meat hunt several years ago. With him were two friends, and on the meat rack hung the meat of three young bulls.

Later, our discussion turned to the lack of trophy bulls near his

camp. Naturally, his answer was to close the cow season. He refused to consider that in three or four years, the bulls on his meat rack would have been trophies for his clients. It takes young bulls to grow trophy bulls.

The moose in Alaska serve a threefold purpose, you might say.

Some seek them solely for meat, some seek them for a combination of recreation and meat and some seek them for the trophy. And for many of those who claim to be meat hunters, the hope of someday obtaining a trophy also occupies an important niche in their minds. Management plans for moose must

TROPHY ANIMAL—Bull moose are six to eight years old before they achieve peak antler growth. Harvest of young bulls reduces trophy possibilities.

recognize these different goals—meat, recreation and trophy—and that they require different philosophies.

When the objective is to produce a maximum number of moose for hunters (to provide both meat and a lot of hunting fun for the public), the moose population should be heavily harvested, and few if any bulls will live long enough to reach trophy size. Moose of both sexes should be harvested and the trick is to kill nearly as many moose as were added to the population by the past spring's crop of calves. This is an oversimplification of an intense form of game management that requires aerial surveys, accurate harvest information, biological specimens from the harvest and perhaps even habitat manipulation.

When the objective is to produce large antlered (trophy) moose, the harvest of animals from the popula-

tion will be at a lower level than the above example. It takes six to eight years for a bull to reach peak antler growth. By harvesting bulls at a lower rate, this growth is allowed to occur. Historically, this has been a simple form of management that primarily required only that few hunters went afield. In the past, Alaska has had reasonably good trophy hunting because there were many areas, which for a variety of reasons, attracted only a few hunters each year. However, that option is fast running out as both human populations and store-bought meat prices increase. If trophy hunting is to be maintained in Alaska, steps must be taken to insure that a bull lives long enough to grow large antlers.

Trophy hunting for moose now occurs primarily in areas with sparse human populations. The residents of these areas look upon moose as a meat animal with little

interest in the antlers. However, the harvest of young bulls by subsistence hunters has the same detrimental effect on future trophy hunting as the meat-bulls killed by our guide and his friends. Fortunately, the very sparsity of subsistence-dependent populations means they have only a minor impact on the availability of trophy bulls.

The biggest inroads into future trophy bull populations are being made by the recreational-meat hunter who lives in another area but travels to the lightly hunted trophy country to kill his game. The numbers of these hunters are increasing daily as Alaska's major towns and cities grow. These hunters incur considerable expenses in their search for moose and will generally kill the first bull they see—be it a "mulligan" or a 70-inch.

There are two segments to any moose population—the male and

(continued on page 13)

CONTROVERSIAL COW—Harvest of cow moose by purely "meat" hunters can help boost production of trophy bulls.



Photos by Leonard Lee Rue, III

TROPHY MOOSE

(continued from page 3)

the female—and the meat from either segment tastes the same. The meat of the cow is considered by most to be superior to that of the ruddy or post-rutt bull. If Alaska is going to manage some areas of the state for trophy moose, the meat hunter is going to have to be discouraged from killing the “mulligan bulls” in those areas. (The only other options are to force the meat hunters to compete for the large antlered bulls, go without their winter meat supply or kill their moose illegally.)

The cow moose can be used under biologically sound management to satisfy the meat hunters' demands. As the areas which qualify as trophy areas with light hunting pressure become fewer, the “trophy cow moose” is going to become an increasingly important part of trophy management. Ironically, by harvesting cow moose, we can increase the number of bulls. When a cow is removed from a stable population, it will be replaced by another moose. Approximately half the cows removed will be replaced by bull calves. If we take only bulls, the percentage (and total number) of bulls will decline. If we take only cows, the number of cows will decline. If we take a reasonable number of each sex, we can maintain the ratio of bulls and cows at desirable levels.

Probably the biggest problem facing trophy management will be the hunter himself. For the hunters dependent upon moose for subsistence, any moose (trophy bull, mulligan bull or cow) will satisfy his demands. He is going to resent having to let those young bulls go. The recreational meat hunter is a more complex problem and is more numerous than the “pure” meat hunter. While the meat is an important part of the hunt, there is often an emotional response in his makeup that makes the killing of a male animal more satisfying than harvesting a cow. He will frequently

UNDER PRESSURE—New game management plans will be designed to provide for trophy management of moose in many parts of state.

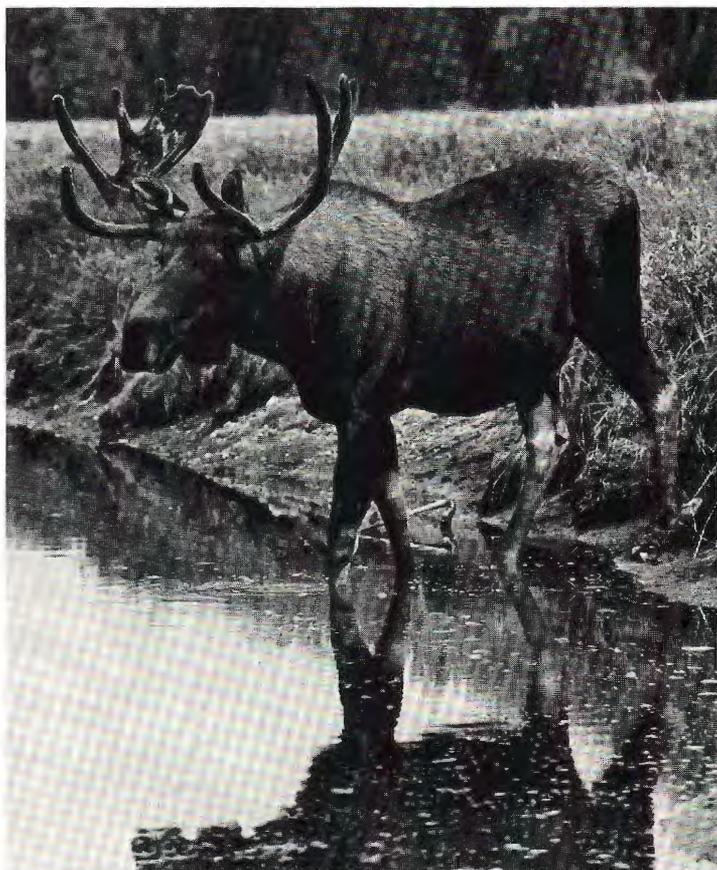


Photo by Leonard Lee Rue, III

pass up several cows in hopes of killing a bull and may finally take a cow only as a last resort. Yet he is the hunter most likely to harbor the dream of killing a trophy or seeing a son or friend bag such an animal. The sacrifices he makes by passing up that “mulligan bull” may someday be rewarded with a 60-inch plus trophy.

Trophy hunters too will have misgivings. Although management for trophy moose may seem ideal for them, such a system will eventually have to be quite restrictive. The opportunity to hunt these areas may be limited by permits and not all who wish to hunt there will be allowed to in any given year. Also, restrictions on methods of transportation or season lengths may exclude some trophy hunters from areas they have traditionally used.

Presently, the Department of Fish and Game is establishing man-

agement plans that will include trophy management for moose in many areas of the state. These plans will work only as long as they are supported by the hunting public. If the hunter isn't willing to forego young bulls in some areas, he's going to find that the expense of reaching the remaining pockets of large bulls has priced him out of trophy hunting.

A changing Alaska requires that the hunters must also change their demands: the freely available game of the past and only minor hunting restrictions must give way to more responsible demands for specific game management techniques to achieve specific results. The harvesting of cow moose is one of the options available to make the production of meat for rural Alaskans compatible with the production of trophy bull moose for both Alaskan residents and nonresidents. □

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