

# Moose

*(Alces alces)*

**M**OOSE MAKE IT EASY for people to become enamored with them. They are graceful, stately, and approachable, often ignoring onlookers who don't venture too close.

But the moose is not just another pretty face. What looks like an unlikely cross between a horse and a hippopotamus is actually an exceptionally well-constructed animal. Its bulbous muzzle contains large nostrils that provide an excellent sense of smell, and the moose can actually use its prehensile upper lip to grasp vegetation. Its exceptionally large ears can be moved independently of each another, providing the moose with extremely sensitive hearing and the ability to determine sound direction. The eyes, too, move independently, allowing the moose to see in two directions at once.

The body color varies from brown to the near-black of adult bulls. This dark coloration makes it difficult to spot a moose in the forest shadows. Though its long legs may seem ungainly, they allow a moose to easily carry its 700- to 800-pound body through snow and swamps and over downed trees. And the moose can splay its huge feet to add support when wading through deep snow.

**RANGE:** Moose are found throughout the world in northern climates. Four subspecies live in North America and three in Eurasia. Montana is home to the smallest subspecies, *A. a. shirasi*, which is also found in several other western states, southern Alberta, and southeastern British Columbia.

According to Jerry Brown, FWP wildlife biologist in Libby, moose occur across much of the mountainous portion of Montana and are gradually expanding into previously unoccupied locations, including some areas east of the Continental Divide.

**HABITAT:** The adaptable moose inhabits a wide variety of habitat types. The basic

requirements are abundant food and protective cover. Moose browse on the leaves and twigs of deciduous trees and shrubs. They frequently feed in timber cuts, burns, and other open, disturbed areas where new vegetation is more abundant and nutritious than what grows under shaded tree canopy. Willow is a moose favorite, and in some areas the large mammal wades into lakes and ponds to feed on aquatic plants during summer.

Though their large bodies, thick hide, and dense hair protect them from cold, the animals overheat easily. When temperatures rise above 23 degrees Fahrenheit in winter and 57 degrees in summer, moose can suffer from heat stress. To beat the heat, moose move to cool, heavy cover on north-facing slopes or to damp areas. Often in summer, you can find moose standing in ponds and streams trying to cool off. When all else fails, they will open their mouth and pant like a dog to rid their bodies of excess heat.

Though moose are able to wade through powder snow 5 feet deep or more, the extra energy needed to move through wet snow deeper than even 2 feet sends the animal to conifer groves, where there is less snow. Moose will also migrate to lower elevations where snow is not so deep.

**DANGER TO HUMANS:** Moose usually are not aggressive unless approached too closely. Cows with calves can be especially dangerous. Usually an attacking moose will make a short rush, which usually gets the point across, but occasionally it will make an all-out attack, striking with its powerful hooves. A moose can seriously injure or even kill a human. Sometimes the animal will attack as soon as it is surprised, but



GARY BEELER

usually it will give a warning signal—ears laid back against the head and, even more ominous, hair standing up on the back of its neck—before attacking. Ignore these at your peril.

**MORTALITY:** Moose are big and powerful, but not invincible. Wolves, cougars, and grizzly bears kill moose. Black bears often prey on newborn calves. Vehicles also take their toll. Dark moose can be difficult to see against a dark road at night.

Some parasite infestations can lead to moose mortality. Winter ticks are common on moose and, in small numbers, cause no problem. However, heavy infestations of 40,000 to 50,000 ticks per moose result in considerable hair loss as the animal tries to rid itself of the parasites. Fat reserves become depleted due to the loss of insulation against cold, the increased energy expended in grooming to remove ticks, and a subsequent decrease in time spent feeding. Blood loss to such great numbers of ticks can result in anemia.

**MANAGEMENT:** Brown says Montana FWP biologists conduct aerial surveys in major moose population areas to keep tabs on moose numbers. The department issues limited numbers of bull, antlerless, and either-sex hunting permits through a random drawing. Roughly 600 moose are shot by hunters in Montana each year. 🐻

**BY BILL PETERSON**

*A northern Minnesota wildlife biologist until he retired in 2000, Bill Peterson now lives near Troy.*