

The Moose

Tall (six feet or more), a dark chocolate brown, and certainly less than handsome, the moose has become a favorite of visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park. With its bulbous nose, hump over the shoulder, and a slightly ridiculous looking “bell” or dewlap hanging from the neck, the awkwardly constructed moose is seldom confused with its more populous and elegant cousin, the elk.

HISTORY

Historical records dating back to the 1850's suggest that moose were most likely only transient visitors to the area that is now Rocky Mountain National Park. Indeed, aside from reports of a few wandering individuals, there is scant evidence that a breeding population ever existed in northern Colorado.

In 1978 and 1979, the Colorado Division of Wildlife transferred two groups of moose (12 each year) from the Uintah Mountains and Grand Teton herds to an area just west of the Never Summer Range near Rand, Colorado.

The original collection of 4 bulls, 13 cows, 4 yearlings, and 3 calves -- all were radio collared for subsequent monitoring -- prospered from the start.

In 1980, Rocky Mountain National Park visitors and staff saw the first members of the herd that had migrated into the Kawuneeche Valley at Harbison's Meadow (near the Grand Lake Entrance to the Park), and at Lulu City. True to their disposition to wander, two cow moose were sighted by rangers on the Continental Divide at the Boulder-Grand Pass just a year

later. During those first several years, it is probable that most animals returned to the release site to winter over in their breeding grounds.

The headwaters of the Colorado proved to be prime moose habitat when two cows and a bull wintered over in the Kawuneeche Valley in 1988. Although sightings occur east of the Continental Divide, most moose are in the Kawuneeche Valley.

MOOSE AND YOU

Both mature males (with their palmate antlers) and females (antlerless) can be extremely short-tempered and are therefore, quite unpredictable. The females are particularly protective of their calves.

“This is a wild and dangerous animal!”

Rutting bull moose have charged horses, cars, and locomotives. The moose has a top speed of 35 miles (55 kilometers) per hour -not odds most visitors would choose

to challenge in a foot race! If you see a moose display the threat position of either “head high” or “head low”, it is time to retreat. Visitors can most safely view moose from a distance or from the interior of a vehicle.

HABITAT

Moose are loners by nature and these largest members of the deer family rarely travel with more than one or two other moose companions. They prefer specific and individual habitats to social companionship. The herd (expanded from the original 24 to nearly 700 in 1994) is scattered over a range that now extends southwest to the San Juan Mountains, and west to Steamboat Springs. The

coniferous forests and aspen groves that are typical of Colorado's Middle Park and North Park areas provide a supportive environment for moose. This semi-solitary life style ensures a larger feeding range that includes a diet of willow and aspen browse and aquatic plants that grow in shallow lakes.

LIFE CYCLE

Moose generally return to the same winter range and leave each spring to find a summer range that may be 5-10 miles (8-16 km) away.

Throughout the spring and summer months bulls experience a rapid growth of velvet-covered antlers that culminates in a flattened rack as much as 80 inches (2 m) from tip to tip. The velvet is usually gone by mid-September.

The rut (mating season) extends from September through November. A bull attends only one female at a time (although he may breed with several cows in one season). Calves are born in the spring after an eight-month gestation period.

Twin calves are relatively uncommon, occurring in less than

five percent of all births. However, the local habitat and its abundant forage appear to have stimulated an above-average rate of twins.

Over a 20-year life span in the wild, bulls may reach a height of 6 1/2 to 7 1/2 feet (2-2.3 m) at the shoulder, and weigh from 800-1,600 pounds (360-725 kg). Cows are only slightly less imposing at 5 to 6 1/2 feet (1.5-2 m) tall and 600-1,000 pounds (270-450 kg) in weight.

Superb hearing, and good sense of smell compensate for relatively poor eyesight. These attributes plus their impressive size are excellent defenses against their few predators. Mountain lions prey on moose, and coyotes will occasionally take the sick or very young. (The wolf is no longer present in Colorado.)

MOOSE VIEWING AND PERSONAL SAFETY

Visitors may see moose at almost any time of the day. As noted, cows may travel and browse with a calf, or some bulls may wander in pairs. Each such social unit tends to establish its own range, and may stay in a given location for days or weeks, as long as food sources last and the animals are not harassed.

Moose favor willow bottoms and beaver ponds. Rangers have frequently seen moose in the half mile stretch just north of Onahu Creek Trailhead, along the Onahu Trail itself, in the beaver ponds next to Timber Creek Campground, at Lulu City, and in the Big Meadows area.

If you spot a moose while hiking a trail, begin a slow retreat and yield the trail to the moose. Be especially alert to the presence of a calf should you encounter the antlerless cow. Avoid, at all costs, coming between a cow and her calf.

If you are fortunate enough to spot a moose while driving through the Park, pull well off to the side of the road and remain at your vehicle. Keep an eye open for less cautious visitors who may bolt across the road in hopes of getting a closer view.

Enjoy the magnificent moose... from a safe distance.