

2000 FALL COMPENDIUM OF WILDLIFE APPRECIATION



Colorado's Wildlife Company

A detailed black and white illustration of two moose in a forest. The moose are positioned on either side of the center, facing each other. They are surrounded by numerous birch trees with characteristic white bark and dark lenticels. The ground is covered with low-lying vegetation and shadows from the trees.

MOOSE ON THE LOOSE

Of Moose and Men

MOOSE IN COLORADO

by Mary Taylor Young

What has a bulbous nose, long legs, big ears, wide feet and headgear that would work as a giant hat rack? A moose, of course. From a human-eye-view, this ungainly-looking animal invites jokes. Surely this beast was put together by a committee!

Images of Bullwinkle aside, the moose is a magnificent animal. Standing six feet tall at the shoulder and weighing up to half a ton, the moose is the largest species of wildlife in Colorado. Females are smaller than males, ranging from 600 to 800 pounds. By comparison, the grizzly bear, generally considered a sizable animal, stands about four feet tall at the shoulder and weighs 300 to 600 pounds, based upon records of grizzlies killed in Colorado. (Grizzly bears have not been seen in the wild in our state since 1979.)

MOOSE HAUNTS

Picture a marshy mountain meadow set against a dark spruce forest, with a willow-lined stream meandering through it. There's no

sign of wildlife until a moose head rises into view above the willows, water streaming from its face and strands of marsh plants dripping from its mouth. Moose inhabit high mountain wetlands at the edge of forests. From spring through fall they feast on lush green growth including sedges, grasses, aquatic plants and wildflowers. The best habitat for moose is a wet meadow in the early stages of succession following fire, logging or beaver activity. The vigorous green vegetation found in such areas provides the nutrition and bulk moose need. During the warm months, when these meadows offer a sort of all-you-can-eat moose buffet, one moose may consume as much as 24 pounds of forage per day. Come winter, when food is harder to find, moose browse on the stems, buds, leaves and bark of trees and shrubs, and their consumption falls to a mere 11 pounds per day—bistro dining. Stored fat from summer gluttony sustains the moose through those leaner times.

A look at the range map for moose in North America shows they are animals of northern forests, inhabiting

most of Alaska and Canada below the Arctic Circle, extending into northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, upper New England and Maine. A slender finger of moose range extends down the Rockies through Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, just touching into Colorado and northern Utah.

CALL ME "SIR"

Like other deer, moose breed in autumn, from mid-September to early November. Preoccupied with the rites of fall, their necks and shoulders swollen for the rut, male moose spend little time foraging. At this time the bulls become quite belligerent, thrashing shrubs with their antlers, bellowing and moaning, and challenging and fighting other males. This is not the time to wander aimlessly among the willows in moose country. An agitated bull moose, which can sprint at speeds up to 35 miles per hour, may charge anything in its path. Being thundered down upon by a 1,000-pound rutting moose would ruin anyone's outdoor experience. It is wise any time of year when hiking in moose habitat to be alert for the

presence of moose and avoid coming too close, as cows with calves may charge if they are surprised by a hiker and feel threatened.

The moose rut is less of "an event" than elk breeding. Bull moose don't bugle in the fall and they don't gather harems of females, so don't expect to see mountain meadows filled with moose during the rut. Instead, males must locate females within their breeding range, and one bull only effectively mates with two or three cows a season.

By mid-winter, with the breeding season over, bull moose lose their antlers, then immediately start growing a new set. Moose spend the winter foraging and can paw through snow nearly a foot and a half deep to reach food. While herds of elk may be a familiar image in the Colorado mountains, don't look for herds of moose. Moose are solitary animals. A cow with calf is the only common social grouping. Winter sometimes brings several individuals together in riparian areas, which offer cover and food, but this is more a response to available resources and conditions than a social interaction. Each moose forages within a home range, but moose do not defend territories against each other.

Calves are born in late May and early June, usually a single young, though twins are not unusual, occurring in 11 to 29 percent of births. Where food is abundant and the moose population small, twins are more likely.

Further north, wolves are the principal predators of moose. Bears also kill some

Moose scat varies depending upon the animal's diet, but is often a large pile (a quart or more) of lozenge-shaped pellets. This illustration is 80% of actual size.



moose, primarily calves. In Colorado, however, moose live a relatively predation-free existence—they don't occupy prime black bear habitat, there are no wolves, and predators like coyotes, mountain lions and domestic dogs take little toll. Illegal shooting, usually from hunters mistaking moose for elk, is the primary cause of mortality.

A MOOSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

As Coloradans get used to seeing a moose, they can be forgiven for thinking them a little funny-looking. Even people who have lived close to moose for generations think them a bit oddly-designed. In a story told by the Abenaki Indians of southeastern Canada and the northeastern United States, when the Creator first made a moose, it came out too large. But trying to squeeze the moose down into a smaller size didn't work too well either, leaving the moose with a long body, humped back and big, square nose.

At least that's a better explanation for the moose's appearance than that it was put together by a committee.

Data source: *Mammals of Colorado*, Fitzgerald et al., Denver Museum of Natural History Press, 1994

Colorado is at the southern edge of the moose's range so it is unlikely the species roamed the state in any great numbers historically. Occasional stragglers wandered down into the northern part of the state from Wyoming and Utah but there is no evidence of a breeding population.

By the 1970s, there was growing public interest in introducing moose to the state, both for sport and as watchable wildlife. In 1978, private donations allowed the Colorado Division of Wildlife to release four bull moose and eight cows, one with a calf, along the Illinois River in North Park, southeast of Walden. The chosen habitat was willow and lodgepole pine at about 9,000 feet. The next January, CDOW released another 12 moose in the same area—one adult bull, six adult cows, three yearling cows and two cows with calves. In 1986 twelve moose were released into the Laramie River drainage off of Cameron Pass.

Moose took very well to their new Colorado home, moving into Middle Park, Rocky Mountain National Park, and the upper reaches of the Cache la Poudre River. By 1990, the population was around 250 animals. To establish a second moose population in the state, in 1991 CDOW released 20 moose near Spring Creek Pass northwest of Creede, near the headwaters of the Rio Grande River. Another 45 were released there the next year. Moose recently migrated into South Park near the town of Jefferson.

Moose cause little damage, rarely bothering ranchers by devouring haystacks or destroying fencing. Today the statewide moose population is estimated at nearly 1,000 animals. Moose in Colorado are a roaring success.

KNOW YOUR MOOSE

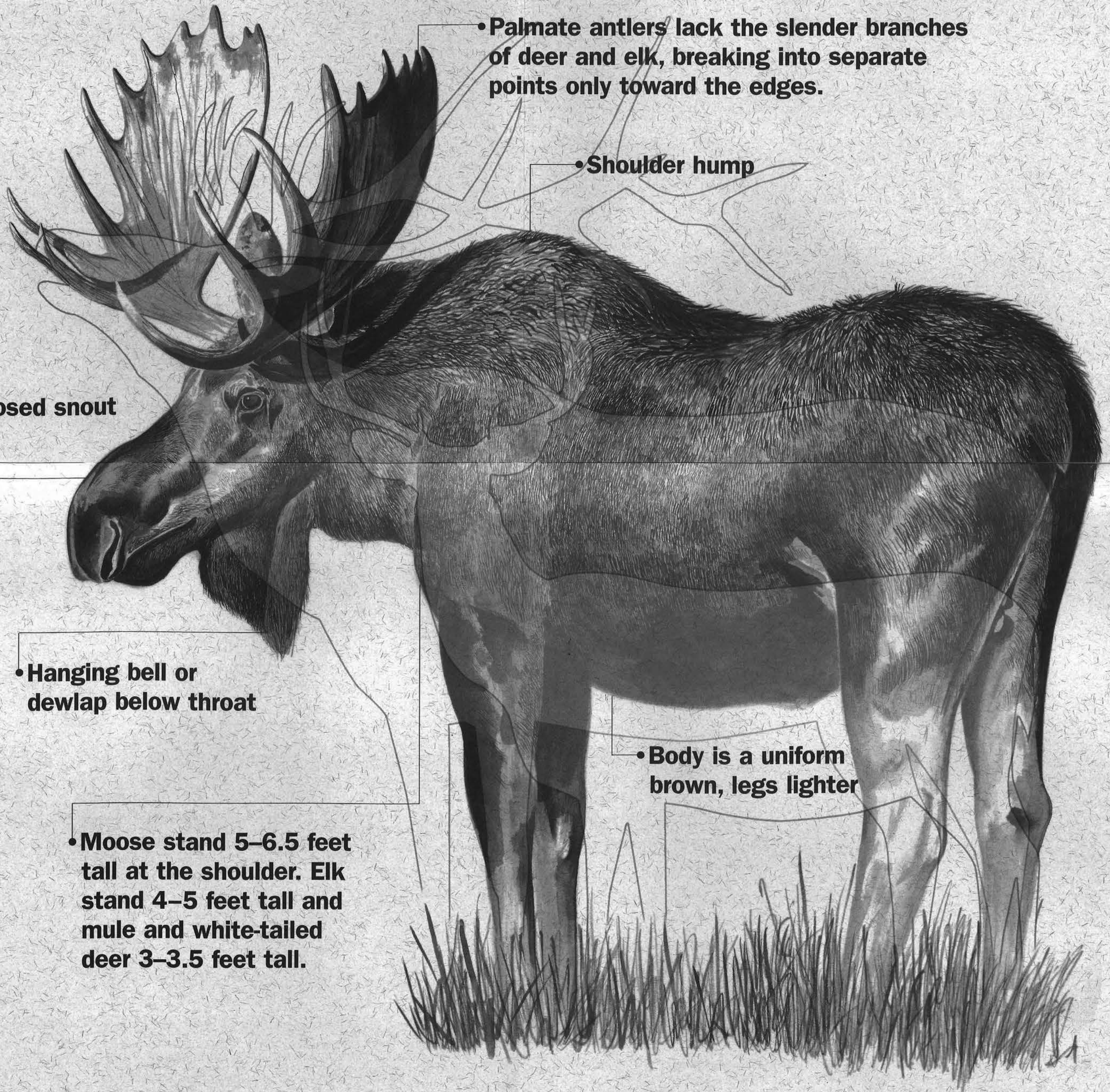
Moose are the largest members of the deer family, but they aren't just big deer that happen to hang out in wetlands. Despite their very large size, they are well-adapted for feeding in marshy terrain. A moose's cloven hoofs spread broadly when it steps, helping to displace the animal's weight on mud or pond bottoms. Slender, pointed hoofs like those of

deer would sink into the muck. Moose also have long legs which keep their bodies above water in wetlands and allow them to stride through dense vegetation and deep snow.

The antlers of a moose are distinctive. Flat and "palmate" (like the palm of a hand), they lack the slender branching of deer and elk antlers, with separate tines only toward the edge. The antlers

of a large bull may spread five feet and weigh 80 pounds. The moose also has a distinctive shoulder hump, blunt muzzle and a fold of skin called the bell or dewlap that dangles from the throat.

The body is uniformly dark brown, turning grayer in winter, with paler legs. Hollow guard hairs not only insulate in winter but provide the moose buoyancy in the water.



• **Palmate antlers lack the slender branches of deer and elk, breaking into separate points only toward the edges.**

• **Shoulder hump**

• **Blunt-nosed snout**

• **Hanging bell or dewlap below throat**

• **Moose stand 5–6.5 feet tall at the shoulder. Elk stand 4–5 feet tall and mule and white-tailed deer 3–3.5 feet tall.**

• **Body is a uniform brown, legs lighter**

MOOSE-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

EARS UP = ALERT AND CURIOUS
EARS LOW AND FLAT = ANGRY
ROAR = UPSET

SNORT = ANGRY
BLEATING = MOOSE CALF CALLING TO ITS MOTHER
GRUNT, WHINE AND MOAN = BABY, I'M A WANT YOU

99. COLORADO STATE FOREST STATE PARK AND MOOSE CENTER

Description: Ranging in elevation from 8,500 to 12,500 feet, the state forest offers diverse forest, meadow, brush, and riparian habitats. Alpine tundra habitat above 11,000 feet. The Medicine Bow Mountains border the State Forest to the east and the Never Summer Mountains to the south.

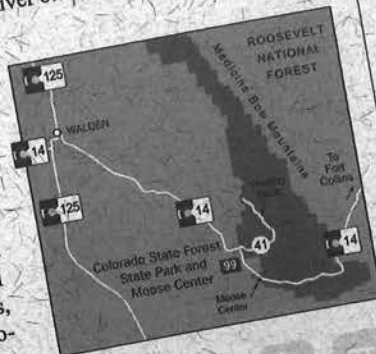
Viewing information: A great variety of mountain wildlife species including moose, elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep, black bears, golden eagles, blue grouse, and northern goshawks. Ducks, grebes, geese, terns, and gulls attracted to lakes and waterways. Great variety of songbirds. River otters sometimes seen along the Michigan River. In winter watch at lower elevations for moose, elk, deer, and white-tailed ptarmigan. Largest concentration of moose in the state. The Moose Center along Colorado Highway 14 one mile east of Gould has interpretive displays and checklists. Two self-guided nature trails, self-guided auto tour. Viewing deck seven miles into the State Forest along County Road 41 overlooks a marshy area. Nature walks, on-site naturalists, and campfire programs in summer.

Ownership: State Parks (970-723-8366), Colorado State Board of Land Commissioners

Size: 70,768 acres in the state forest

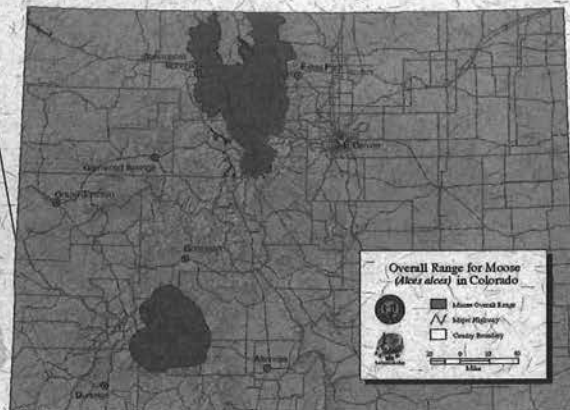
Closest town: Walden, 23 miles; lodging, restaurants

Directions: See map this page



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MOOSE HAUNTS



Current range of moose in Colorado
Map courtesy of the Colorado Division of Wildlife

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