

# Moose

## *Alces alces shirasi*

### Moose in the Roaring Fork Valley

In Colorado there is no historical documentation of a native moose population, although individuals from populations in Utah and Wyoming were seen occasionally, prior to 1978. In that year the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) began the introduction of moose into northern Colorado. Recently, individuals from introduced populations have been sighted regularly near Silverthorne and seem to be moving into our area. A bull was recently sighted and promptly relocated (due to proximity to I-70) from No Name, in Glenwood Canyon, to near Rifle. The Aspen Valley Land Trust has reported a pair of moose on a conservation easement in Canyon Creek. Additionally, reports of moose in the upper Roaring Fork and Frying Pan drainages are becoming more frequent and the DOW reports a resident bull in the Thompson Creek area.

Due to the increasing population of moose in our state interactions between humans and moose will continue to rise. People that expect a docile creature that spooks easily, like other members of the deer family, may be surprised by the often aggressive behavior of these animals. In fact moose have been known to charge both people and pets at high rates of speed even in deep snow. Knowing the behavior of moose and where to find them in our area will help people avoid unfortunate encounters, prevent misidentification by hunters, and more importantly increase the enjoyment of observing wildlife in the Roaring Fork Watershed.

### Natural History

The name moose comes from an Algonquin word for "eater of twigs." Moose are huge animals that can have a length of over 8 feet, stand up to 6 feet at the shoulder, and weigh between 600-1,600 pounds. Individuals seen in Colorado, known as the

Shiras moose, are a smaller subspecies than the larger Alaskan population (*Alces alces gigas*). Studies of moose have documented a lifespan of up to 20 years in the wild. A moose stands on very long legs with the longer front legs giving the animal a sloped appearance and an awkward looking gait. Long legs are helpful to moose for swimming, wading through deep snow, and traveling in boggy riparian areas. Most animals are a deep brown color in the summer and turn a bit grayer in the winter.

Moose are solitary and have a strong attachment to their home range, although many will roam great distances in search of a high-quality food source. Moose may be seen in very thick timber and sagebrush flats in the West though a healthy population requires an extensive supply of browse. Browse includes stems, leaves, buds, bark of deciduous trees, coniferous needles, and large amounts of aquatic vegetation during

the summer. During hard winters moose will often group together in riparian areas where food (primarily willow) and cover are abundant. Therefore, healthy riparian areas are vital to the continued success and proliferation of this magnificent animal.

### Breeding

In Colorado, moose breed in mid-September through early November. During the rut males will often aggressively compete for females by combatting each other and thrashing trees and shrubs. Both males and females utilize a variety of barks, croaks, and moans to communicate during this time.

Gestation lasts roughly 250 days and calves are normally born in late May to early June. A single calf is most common, although the occasional twin and even triplet birth will occur. Twins are most often born when the amount of forage is high in relation to the overall moose population. Calves will



Moose rely heavily on riparian areas for habitat.

stay with the cow for the first year and this is the only time that a close bond is observed between individuals. After the mating season, animals resume their solitary lifestyle and roam great distances in search of abundant food.

### Conservation

Though no breeding population of moose had been documented in Colorado prior to 1978 the animals were thought to be slowly expanding their range southward from Wyoming. In 1978, in order to help this process along, biologists introduced a number of moose in North Park and soon thereafter in both the Rio Grande basin near Creede and the Laramie River basin east of the Medicine Bow Mountains. In January of 2005 the DOW released a cow and two bulls on the Grand Mesa with a goal of establishing a stable population of 150 animals in the next six or seven years. Recent DOW reports note additional moose sightings in or near Middle Park, South Park, Leadville, Gunnison, Yampa, Colorado Springs, and Golden. Populations are thriving in the North Park, Middle Park, and Laramie River areas and limited hunting has been allowed to keep numbers at a reasonable level.

Unfortunately, deaths of moose due to poor identification by hunters, and poaching, account for 15 percent of all moose mortality in Colorado. Remaining deaths are attributed primarily to malnutrition and disease followed by predation and automobile collisions. In Colorado populations, malnutrition is the leading cause of death and snow with a depth of greater than 30 inches hastens this process by placing great stress on the animals. Predation by black bears, mountain lions, coyotes and other predators is relatively light in Colorado. However, in Northern populations the majority of moose kills are attributed to wolves. Mortality due

to traffic on roads is negligible in Colorado up to this point. Conversely, in states with large moose populations collisions cause many moose deaths and are a very serious concern.

### Observing Moose

Moose numbers seem to be increasing in and near the Roaring Fork Watershed. With increased awareness and continued protection of riparian areas, a stable population has a great chance of becoming established within the next decade.



A cow moose with calves. Tom Uhlman photo

Walden, in North Park, has been dubbed the 'moose capitol of Colorado' and with some luck and careful observation the area is still the best bet for observing moose in Colorado.

The best means of observation is to frequent known areas of healthy, thick riparian zones. These zones, found along rivers and lakes, consist of thick deciduous trees and shrubs with

good cover provided by larger conifer trees. Winter snows tend to concentrate animals into a smaller range, especially when an abundant source of food (willows & cottonwoods) can easily be found. As their range becomes smaller in the winter, the chances of seeing moose will increase if you are willing to snowshoe or ski into good habitat away from roads. Since the animals are solitary, and often well hidden, patience and diligence will pay off in efforts to spot moose.

When observing moose remember that they can be very aggressive and will sometimes charge, especially during the rut and when a cow is with her calf. Dogs are especially prone to attack since moose rarely run from small animals. On the other hand, since moose don't always run away, if care is taken when approaching an animal the chances for extended viewing of their behavior and a good picture increases greatly.

*Written by Brent Hayes, January 2006*



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