

# The Self-Guided Hunter...

## MOOSE ON YOUR OWN

A Great Adventure... But Not Always the Best Idea!

Eleventh in a series...

By  
Craig Boddington  
B&C Professional Member

Overall, I don't consider moose to be one of the more difficult animals to hunt. Like all members of the deer family, they have pretty good senses, and they're usually distributed thinly over vast and often difficult country. So you can't expect to find moose—especially trophy-size bull moose—behind every bush on the hillside or in every willow-choked valley. Against this is the fact that moose are giant creatures. They leave big tracks and other sign, their huge dark forms are visible at great distances, and during the rut they get just as silly as most other animals. Maybe even sillier, because rutting bull moose are among the few game animals

known to take on freight trains.

All considered, I haven't been particularly lucky in my pursuit of moose. I've taken a couple of good bulls in Alaska and a few bulls in British Columbia. When I drew a Shiras moose permit in Wyoming I was fortunate to take a very good bull. These are on the plus side of the ledger. On the negative side, I've had several Canadian and a couple of Alaskan tags that I didn't fill—and I may well be the only hunter in the world who has hunted moose-rich Newfoundland several times without taking a bull moose. Also on the negative side, I must admit up front that I have never taken a bull moose "on my own."

This can mean several things. To me it means that, although I have hunted moose unguided several times, I have never seen one that I wanted when hunting on a do-it-yourself basis. It does not mean that I've only taken moose when a guide was holding my hand. It also doesn't mean that I haven't packed my share of moose meat. But it does mean that I've never packed a moose out

all by myself. I'm not at all sure this is a bad thing!

The old saying in big game hunting is that the fun ends when the shooting stops. This isn't altogether true, at least not to me. When the shooting stops the memories start, and part of the memories are how you recovered the game—especially if it took a lot of sweat. Part of the memories, too, are how good the meat tasted. Ah, but with moose it's a bit different. A small "eatin'-size" moose can weigh a thousand pounds—and a really big Alaskan bull can double that. This is a giant animal, and he lives in boggy, soggy, remote country. I'm just crazy enough to think that there's some fun in packing meat—but packing moose any distance is all the fun anyone could want, and is definitely a whole lot of work!

### A REAL ADVENTURE

One of my buddies, Tucson gunmaker John Lazzeroni, is a genuine maverick. His rifles are a bit different, and he created his own line of fast unbelted magnums to fit them. John likes to do his own thing, so it should come as no surprise that he is a dedicated do-it-yourself hunter. He makes an annual trip to Alaska, usually for caribou all the way up in the Brooks Range. A little while back he took a writer with him on a drop-off hunt for moose. Unfortunately the writer had to leave before they got any moose down, but John isn't one to quit. Early in the hunt they'd spotted a good bull, and John figured that if he stayed at it a few more days he would see him again. So he stayed on, by himself, glassing the willows along an Arctic river from dawn until dusk.

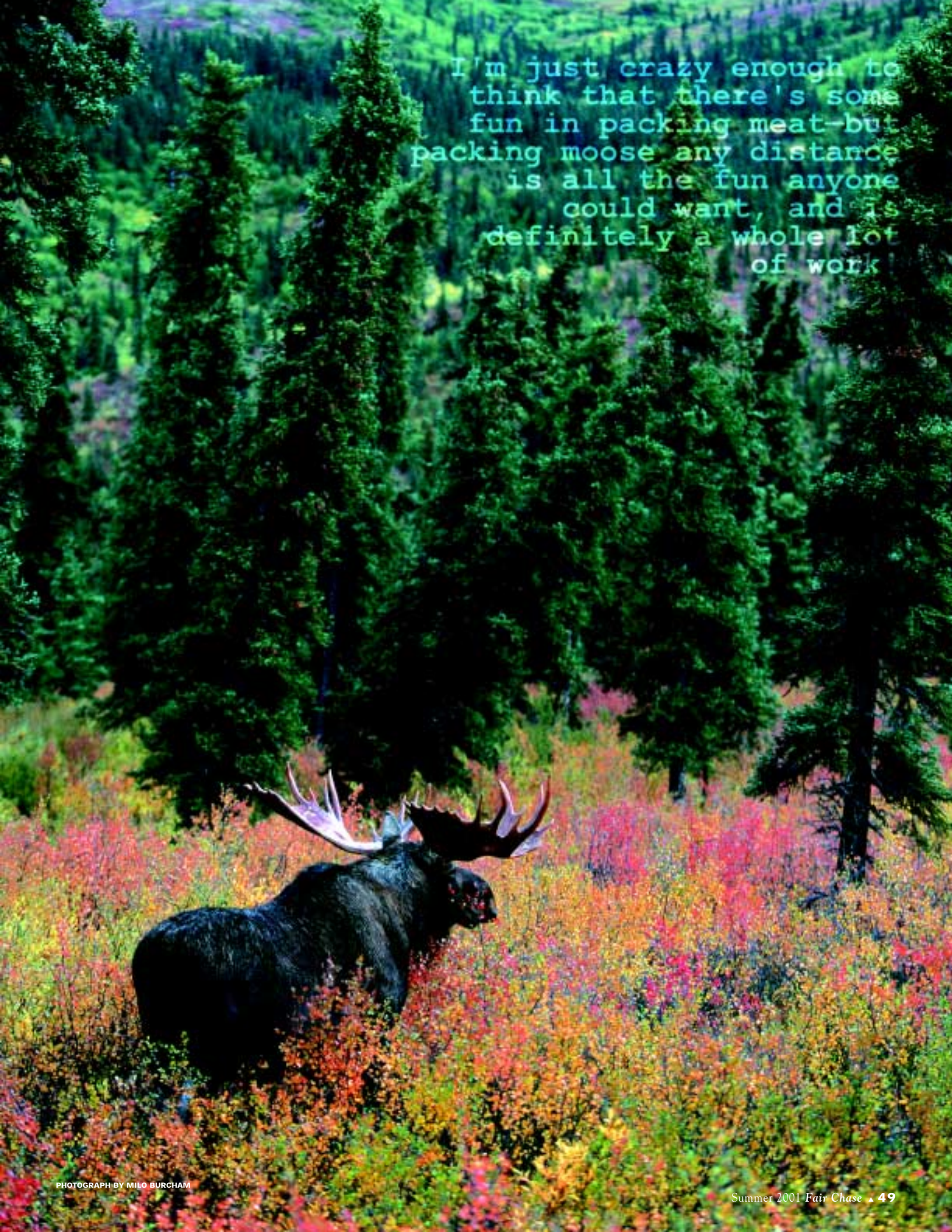
One morning his binoculars picked up the flash of an antler in a little alcove of lower growth among the willows. Yes, that was

In most situations moose hunting is a matter of painstaking glassing.

The animals are huge and easy to spot—but they are also thinly distributed over huge country. Moose hunting is much more difficult in flat, forested country,

with calling one of few options available.





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his moose, tightly bedded just out of the thick stuff. Even with careful marking it took him a long time to locate the moose—and even then the closest he could get and still have a chance to see the bull was about 200 yards. Just the antlers were visible, so he set up his rifle and began a long wait. Sooner or later the bull would stand up.

The temperature was in the 40s that day and it rained intermittently. After several long, cold hours the bull fi-

ver, but his outfitter had told him he could pack the meat to the river if it was closer, and if nothing else worked he would bring him a boat.

So now he had a decision to make: pack the moose to his camp, or to the river? The river was much closer, and not far upstream there was a lake that looked big enough for a Supercub, so he chose the river. This wasn't bad as packing goes. It took a

"Does it drag easily?" was the obvious question.

"Sure, no problem," was the obvious answer. After all, there wasn't much choice, and it wasn't really the outfitter's problem . . .

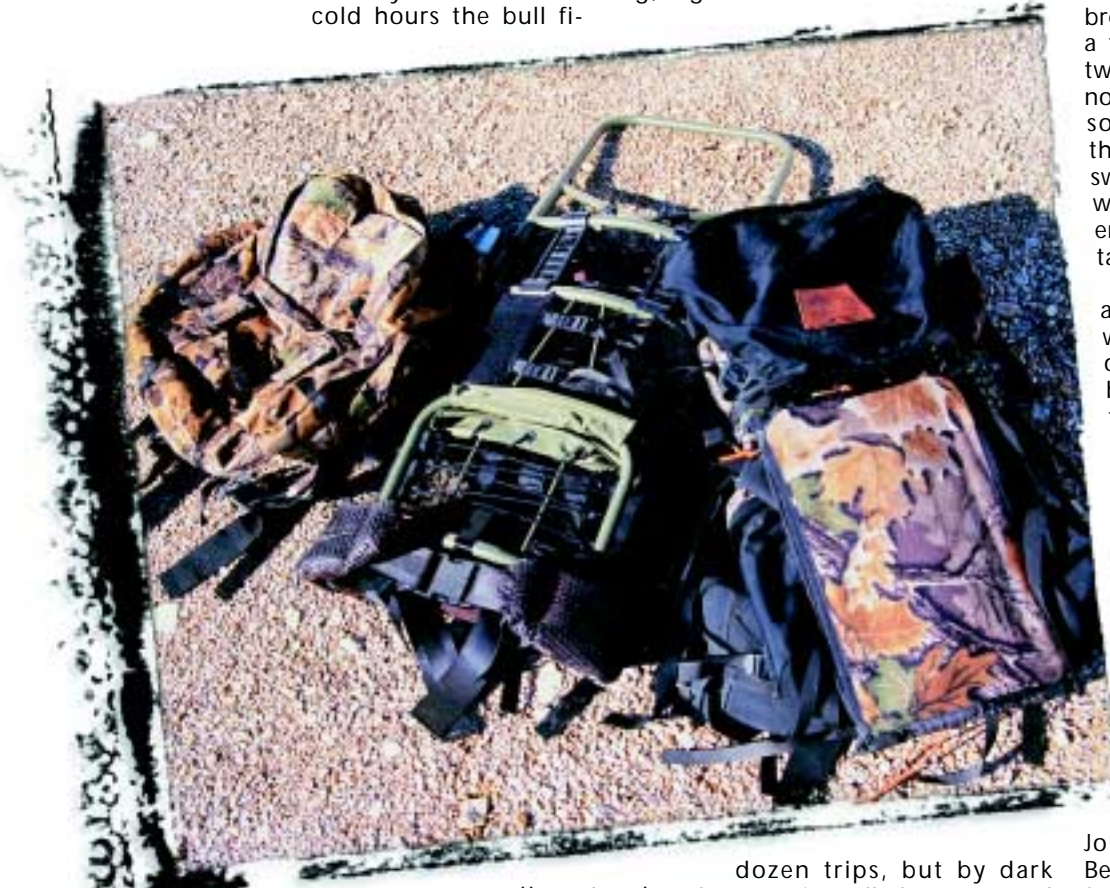
A couple of hours later the plane came back with the boat, motor, and pre-mixed fuel. John loaded minimal gear into the boat—sleeping bag, tent, and a little food—separating the other gear into a pile for the outfitter to pick up. Then he started to drag the boat across the tundra. No, not so easy. It was a back-breaking business of one foot at a time, 5,280 feet to the mile, two miles to go. But there was no help available and no choice, so he dragged the boat all through the day, and by dark, sweat-soaked and sore, the boat was on the river. This was the end of the third day since he'd taken his moose.

He slept ten hours that night and woke to find his clothes still wet. He'd left his lantern at the old camp, and figured that was his one big mistake; heat from the lantern would have dried his socks. But he was on the river, so now it was just a matter of loading up the moose and getting on his way.

The trip down the river took the entire day, and was uneventful—given knowledge of small boats and how to negotiate an Arctic river. John had this knowledge, and even so the laden canoe nearly swamped a couple of times. But at six p.m. he broke out into the big lake, and his outfitter was Johnny-on-the-spot with the Beaver. So on the evening of the fourth day the moose-packing adventure was over.

## LESSONS LEARNED

There are good lessons here and some not so good. John Lazzeroni is obviously not only an experienced hunter, but also extremely experienced at hunting on his own. He was perfectly capable of locating his moose—the easy part—and dealing with it afterward, which is clearly the hard part. However, take a look at the range of skills and physical capabilities involved: not only hunting and camping in the wilderness, but also butchering a huge animal with no assistance; packing heavy loads great distances in the soggy tundra; following a compass bearing in the dark; running a small, un-



No matter how you plan to get your moose back to civilization, chances are you'll have to carry the meat some distance. Choice of pack is extremely important.

Frameless packs (left) are too limited, but both external and internal frame packs work well.

nally stood, and Lazz dropped him at the edge of the willows. Now he was no longer altogether alone in the Alaskan wilderness. He had a giant bull, and full responsibility for its care. It was 10 o'clock that night before he finished the backbreaking chore of field-dressing and skinning his new-found companion. Now thoroughly wet and cold, he made to the top of a ridge in Arctic twilight and spotted his tent in the distance. He took a compass bearing on it, and found his way back in pitch darkness.

The next morning he boned the bull and put the meat into meat sacks, about 60 pounds per load. This job was finished by early afternoon. His tent was on a lake big enough to land a Bea-

dozen trips, but by dark that evening all the meat and the antlers were staged in willows along the river. He marked the spot with tape, put more tape out by his camp, and crawled into his sleeping bag.

His outfitter, obviously an efficient one, landed next to his camp at 10 a.m. He had seen the tape and knew where the moose was. Now came the first real problem. The little lake by the river—and by the moose—would handle a Supercub, but not the Beaver. The outfitter could only haul the freighter canoe on the Beaver, so he'd have to bring it to the camp. John would have to drag it to the river, load the moose, take the river about 34 miles downstream until it emptied into a larger lake, and meet up with the Beaver there.

stable boat down a swift river. His outfitter, since killed in a plane crash, was extremely accommodating and efficient. The weather was also accommodating. Four days from a moose down to a moose completely recovered is actually very quick work, especially for one man working alone. Delays to weather and logistical problems are far more common.

So John's experience is really a model of how a do-it-yourself moose hunt can be done—but there are negative lessons as well. The most important one is this: No one, regardless of how skilled, should hunt unguided in Alaska alone. Even if nothing goes wrong two heads are better than one, and two strong backs are far better than just one. If something does go wrong—and in the northern wilderness, there's a lot that can go wrong—your life may depend on a cool-headed partner.

The other lesson here is that just having a partner and the desire to shoot a moose isn't enough. Only a small percentage of hunters possess the skill sets and the determination to hunt moose on your own. For most of us, it may not be the best idea you've ever had.

#### THE HUNT

Locating moose is not much different than most other types of big game. It starts with finding a good area. There are some possibilities for unguided moose hunting in the eastern Canadian provinces as well as Alaska, and of course there are tags available for drawing in the Lower 48.

In Canada and Alaska almost all moose hunting requires flying in to remote locations. In the U.S. it is usually possible to hike into good country—but you might wait many years to draw a permit. Wherever you go the research is much the same: word of mouth from hunters who have had good (and bad!) experiences; phone calls to local game wardens and wildlife biologists; outfitters at sports shows and through adver-

The more you can pack the fewer trips you have to make—but overloading yourself is an easy way to get hurt.

I was younger when I packed this moose, and could carry a good deal more than I could safely carry today.



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tisements. Note that Alaskan terminology causes some confusion. An "outfitter" literally outfits a hunt, often providing camp equipment, boats, etc.—but an outfitter is not necessarily a guide or a guide-outfitter. A "transporter" will do just that: transport you and your gear to a hunting area of your choice, and transport you, your gear, and your game from a designated pickup point back to civilization. There are some possibilities for walk-in or float hunts in Alaska without an

Just being in the Alaskan wilderness is a fabulous experience. Unguided moose hunting should be legal, and probably will remain so... but it should only be undertaken by experienced hunters in top physical condition.

outfitter or transporter, but they are rare. Under most circumstances and for most areas you need help—usually a floatplane—to get into good moose country, and you will especially need help to get your moose out.

During the rut, usually the latter part of September, moose can be called fairly readily. In forested areas with little visibility this is the preferred hunting technique, but in more open areas glassing is a more reliable technique. It's amazing how well an animal as big as a moose can hide, even in sparse willows. But when they move they are quite visible, and can be seen from miles away. I much prefer hunting country that offers good vantage points, simply because moose are so visible. You will probably spot bulls that you can't reach on that day, but that's okay. They usually don't move around all that much, so you can mark the area and try again the next day.

Mind you, moose hunting is not a slam-dunk business. Weather is often a key factor. If it's too warm the big animals seem to go to ground. You'll see plenty of sign and you know

there are moose nearby, but you'll drive yourself crazy looking for them. If the weather is nice and cool or, better, you get a fresh snow or, still better, the rut kicks in, you'll see their big, black bodies dotting the hillsides and shorelines. But you can't count on weather and game movement any more with moose than with anything else, so all you can do is put in enough research to get yourself into a good place, allow plenty of time, and hunt hard. Moose hunting is not nearly as successful as most caribou hunting, but if you give yourself 10 days in good country and keep your expectations reasonable your chances are pretty good.

## THE RECOVERY PLAN

While the hunt plan is always important, with moose hunting it is just as important to know exactly how you're going to get your moose meat out of the woods. There are several reasons for this. First, moose meat is some of the finest wild meat in the world. Second, whether it's good or not, you have a moral responsibility to recover it. Third, in most jurisdictions you have a legal responsibility to salvage all edible meat. Fourth, and of overarching importance, getting a moose out of the woods is probably the biggest and most difficult job in all North American big game hunting. If you don't know exactly how you're going to do it before you squeeze the trigger you're running the risk of losing some of that great meat . . . and you're a game violation just waiting for someone to write the ticket.

Moose recovery is such a monumental task that you need to give serious thought as to whether an unguided moose hunt is a good idea or not. It should not be undertaken by any but the most experienced hunters and woodsmen—and only those who are in good physical condition.

There are, of course, a number of options. Under some circumstances it might be possible to recover a moose by floatplane, ATV, even by horseback. Floating northern rivers by boat is a great way to hunt moose, and a boat is also a wonderful way to recover the meat. Depending on where you go and how well you plan, all of these options can be available to un-

guided hunters as well as guided hunters. And even with the best planning and the best equipment available, much depends on exactly where you shoot your moose—and exactly where it falls. Despite the best intentions, most of the time it isn't possible to drop your moose right on a sandbar where you can beach your boat or land a plane!

So even with the best equipment and multiple options it's fairly unusual if you don't have to physically pack your moose at least a short distance. Obviously you can adjust the load to whatever you're comfortable carrying, remembering that the lighter each load the more trips will be required! But remember, too, that moose tend to live in boggy areas with uneven footing, country that sucks at your feet and saps your strength with each step. A pack of just a few hundred yards can be difficult, and a pack of just a couple of miles will be beyond what many can do. This is not meant to be negative: it's simply that you must know exactly what you're getting yourself into. You must also know exactly what your physically capable of, and that sets a limit on how far you can hunt from the camp, lake, waterway, or road.

## BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

A dozen years ago I was hunting moose on the Alaskan Peninsula. We were glassing from a low ridge, and we found a great bull bedded in a big patch of willows below us, just his white antlers gleaming in the sun. He was only 350 yards from us, but that was pushing the distance for the rifle I was carrying—plus there was a strong crosswind. So we marked the spot carefully, got the wind right, and made our approach. We couldn't find him, so we concluded that he had moved off.

We backtracked to the ridge and took another look. No, he hadn't moved; we'd just missed him in the thick stuff. So we tried again, and this time we had a better line. He jumped at about 10 yards, and we got him. He was a great moose, better than we thought and my best bull to date. But now we had a problem. He was down in an incredible jungle of willows, which was bad enough. Worse, it was about three miles to the closest place where a Supercub could land . . . on the far side of several steep ridges. So we

butchered for a day and packed for three days. I was younger then, and my guide was a whole lot younger. We got it done with no problems. But today, as good as that bull was, I'd have to think real hard before I'd do that again! Without horses or ATV's, both rare commodities in most moose country, you need to think a bit before you shoot. In most areas there will be moose that you need to let walk because of the difficulty in recovering them!

#### AN END TO UNGUIDED MOOSE HUNTING?


As we all know, most Canadian provinces require licensed guides for nonresident (or non-Canadian) hunters. Alaska requires licensed guides for brown/grizzly bear, sheep, and goat. As these lines are written the Alaskan House of Representatives is considering House Bill (HB) 144, which would require guides for nonresident moose hunters. Arguments in favor of the bill include the wanton waste issue, and also the fact that a lot of effort and money are expended annually rescuing moose

hunters who become lost or are injured. Arguments against this legislation seem even more compelling. For one thing, non-residents don't have a monopoly on stupidity; unprepared resident hunters also violate the meat recovery laws, and also get lost or injured trying to do things they have no business doing. Then, of course, there are the issues of lost revenue from license sales and services to unguided hunters, and fair utilization of federal lands.

This particular legislation was proposed by the guide industry, and is not supported by Alaska's Department of Fish and Game. As of late April the DFG was confident that the bill would go nowhere . . . this time. I don't think it's appropriate for nonresident moose hunters to be required to hire a guide. I think it is appropriate for brown/grizzly bear, and also for sheep and goat, this because of the greater danger involved in hunting these animals—from the bears themselves, and from the mountains the sheep and goats live in. But that doesn't

mean unguided moose hunting is for everyone!

If this particular bill is defeated the same issue will undoubtedly be surfaced again and again. The Alaskans themselves will decide, and we nonresidents can't do much about it—except to absolutely ensure that we don't add to the statistics that support it! For some of us the reality is that any unguided hunting in the Alaskan wilderness is a bad idea. For many of us unguided hunting for caribou, black bear, or Sitka blacktail deer is perfectly practical, simply because the physical effort is less and the logistics of meat recovery are more easily solved. Moose hunting on your own is a different and much more difficult situation. The adventure is great, but the effort required is tremendous. I've packed a great deal of meat in my time, enough to know that I don't personally want to pack any more moose, especially not by myself. If you do, more power to you . . . but make sure you're absolutely ready for both the adventure and the effort. ▲▲▲



I was extremely pleased when I took this big bull—but that was before reality set in.

Then we realized what a horrible spot he was in. We got him packed out, but it took several days of back-breaking effort.