

First MORNING MOOSE

BY FRED W. WILLIAMS
B&C Associate

MY WYOMING MOOSE HUNT STARTED WITH A FUNNY FEELING THAT I MIGHT GET LUCKY.

I had always heard and read that the difficult part about moose hunting in Wyoming is drawing a tag, not getting a moose. The odds of drawing a moose tag in Wyoming are nearly the same as winning the lottery, and for me, receiving one is better than winning the lottery.

Big game hunting is something that I have always enjoyed. It is the whole experience, the planning, the hunt in breathtaking country, and hopefully in the end, an adventure that culminates with the hard work of packing out a magnificent animal.

Although hunting for the sole purpose of collecting trophies has

never been important to me, this was the second time that I had been drawn for moose in Wyoming, and I intended to make it count. I have to admit that I was a little disappointed in myself when I got too anxious and filled my first tag with an average moose. Part of the challenge of hunting alone is learning to judge animals quickly and having the mental discipline not to feel pressured to pull the trigger. A guide isn't there to coach and give reassurance that there will be another opportunity. I knew if I pulled the trigger it would probably be another 10 to 15 years before I would have another chance to hunt moose again.

I live in the Midwest, and having to earn a living adds pressure by limiting the available vacation time to dedicate to the hunt. Another complication is the lack of opportunity to study moose in Indiana. I had to rely on comparing photographs with the antlers from my first moose. It quickly became evident that if the first tine off the palm was about the same size as the brow tine, it's a good one. Add either forked or palmated brow tines and wide main palms, go get him! I call this a "first morning" moose, one that you would shoot on the first day of the hunt.

Over the years of hunting the Jackson Hole area, I have certainly seen a lot of moose. Driving the roads through the National Forest seems to be one of the popular methods for locating and hunting these animals. However, I have always enjoyed hunting big game on foot. Even antelope. For me, the experience of getting away from the roads and the

trails and working with the pack-horses to hunt an animal in a wilderness setting is big game hunting.

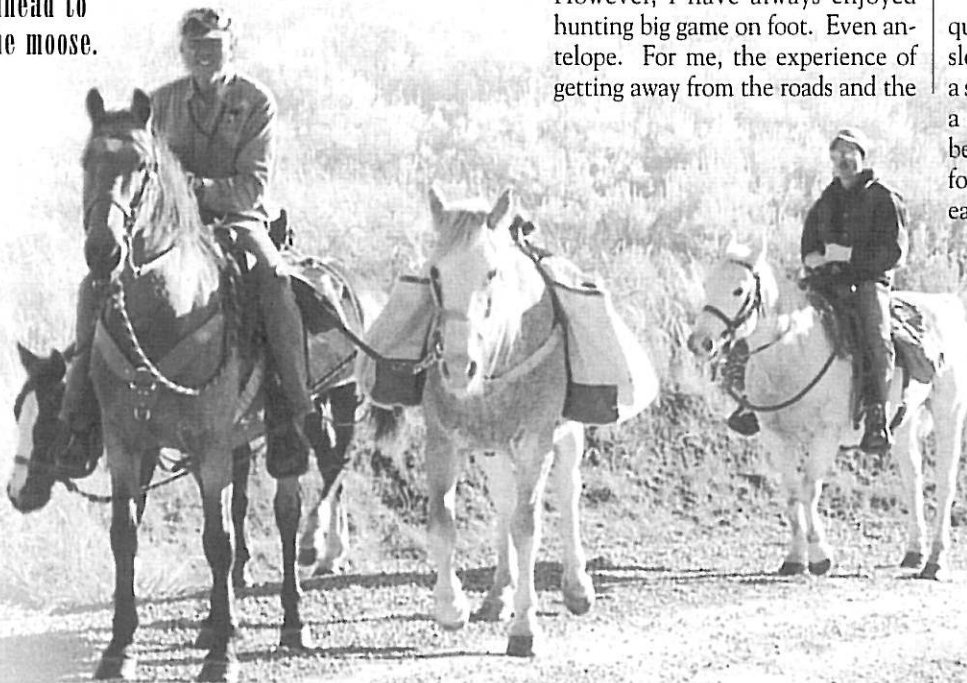
I'm fortunate that my folks live in the moose area that I planned to hunt. It simplified the travel logistics. Dad shares the same excitement for hunting that I do and actively scouted the area over the summer and helped with the planning. Having access to a house with a warm bed and shower as a "camp" is a luxury. Add Mom's cooking, particularly her peanut butter torte, and it can't be beat for a base camp.

The use of frequent-flyer miles to Jackson resulted in a tour of North America's finest airports. Even though my gear had been shipped ahead weeks before, it was, needless to say, a long trip. A 1:00 a.m. arrival made the decision not to hunt in the morning easier, but I still couldn't sleep. I was up early looking out the picture windows for moose. Dad and I used the time to our advantage to have a big breakfast and to recheck the zero on my Remington Model 700.

As we began hunting that afternoon, I was already doubting my ability to hold out for a good moose. It was a continuous mental debate not to get in a hurry. We hunted the same drainage where I harvested my first moose many years earlier. It's a huge flat with 6 to 10 foot high willow bushes that tend to cause the moose to appear out of nowhere. Almost like hunting 1,000 pound rabbits!

Still dragging from the frequent-flyer mile tour and a restless sleep from the previous night, it was a short hunt. We did spot a cow and a calf, as well as several mule deer, before heading back to "base camp" for Mom's cooking. Before retiring early, we decided on a hunt in the

Fred Williams (far right) with his father riding from the corral to the trailhead to pack out the moose.



National Forest closest to the house for the next morning. A couple of extra hours of sleep would do me some good and help my ongoing struggle not to get in a hurry.

I awoke with the feeling that it was going to be an outstanding day. The morning was a Wyoming classic. There was a heavy frost, and the grass crunched as Dad and I walked in the dark beneath crystal clear skies, the Milky Way, and what seemed to be a million stars. However, the mental debate continued. I kept telling myself to not hurry. It would have to be a "first morning" moose before I would pull the trigger.

We made our way to the main ridge in the area. It was high and relatively open with thick aspens and some black timber on one side. Our plan was to stop short of the ridge and wait for shooting light because experience suggested that there may be moose in the timber. We didn't want to bump into any in the dark. Our hope was to get to the ridge top shortly after daylight and to work it slowly just below the sky line while spotting the meadows and willow flats in the distance.

I walked parallel to Dad on the opposite side of the ridge so that we could watch both sides. The plan was to go get the other if either of us spotted a moose. I noticed fresh moose sign everywhere as I walked. Then, almost immediately, there it was, way off across the drainage! I just got a glimpse of a black rump disappearing behind a small ridge. I couldn't run fast enough. I kept telling myself, "Don't hurry. Slow down!" It was mid-morning, and I knew that the moose would soon disappear into the black timber for the day. I grabbed Dad, and we worked our way down a finger ridge off the main ridge to get a better look.

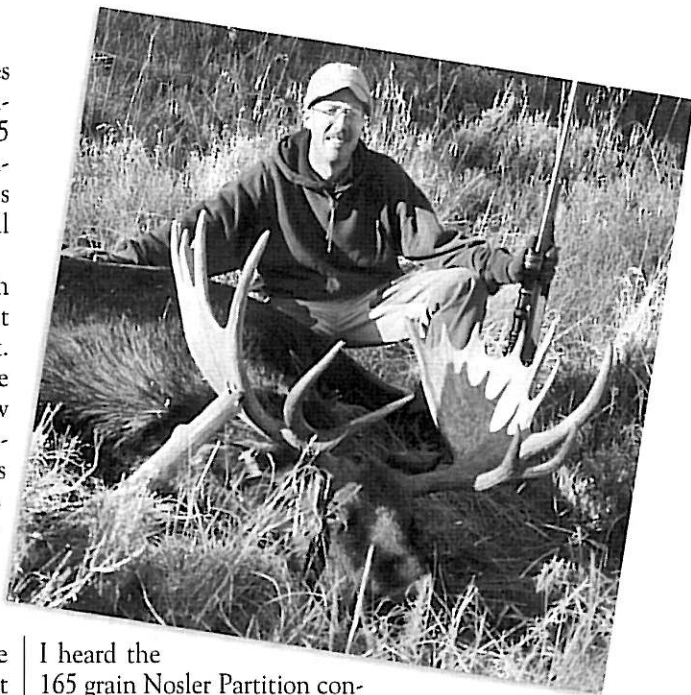
Then I saw him. At over a mile away I caught a glint from his antlers. He was traveling up a drainage toward the timber with two cows and a calf. Again hurrying, I didn't take the time to set up the spotting scope. I hand held it on 15 power. Even with the scope bouncing all over and the distance, it was plain to see that the bull had heavy palmation. One of the criteria! I looked at Dad and said that this bull deserved a closer look, but the moose were a long ways off and moving fast towards the tim-

ber. I stripped off all my heavy clothes and handed everything to my dad except my rifle and pack. I was 15 pounds lighter after riding a mountain bike 40 miles a week for months back in Indiana. It was time for all the bike riding to pay off.

The plan was for Dad to watch the moose from a vantage point while I tried to run for a closer look. After making a mental note of the landmarks, I took off. I don't know how far it was, but it was a cross-country run well over a mile across the main drainage. The wind was in my favor, but the mule deer weren't. Three deer snorted and bolted just as I was approaching the timber on the downwind side of the small drainage that the moose were in. At that point, I thought for sure the stalk was blown. I approached the edge of the timber hoping to get a look at the moose about 200 yards across the drainage. I was drenched with sweat and my glasses were steamed up. All I could see was a black blur on the edge of the timber opposite from me! My mental battle continued. "Slow down!" I shed my backpack and reversed my hat to get the bill away from my glasses and waited. It seemed like an eternity before I could see. Leaving my pack behind, I worked my way about 50 yards to the very edge of the timber and got into shooting position against a large pine.

The first look through the scope said it all. Broad main palms, forked brow tines, everything. A "first morning" moose! He was quartering slightly towards me and about ready to join the cows and calf in the timber. There wasn't much time. "Slow down! Wait for a better shot," I again reminded myself. He finally turned broadside, quartering slightly away.

Centering the cross hairs just behind the shoulder, I squeezed the trigger, my gut instinct telling me that it was a good shot. I heard the report from the 7mm Remington Mag. and the familiar "fffwaap" of the bullet striking home, but the moose still stood. I had fully expected the moose to drop. Experience said to keep shooting. I squeezed the trigger and confidently repeated the shot two more times while the moose remained standing. With each report,



I heard the 165 grain Nosler Partition connect. About this time my adrenaline was overtaking my mental discipline. I was losing control.

With only one shot left, I started to get out of position to shoot offhand, but I was able to pull myself back together into a solid sitting position back against the tree. "One shot left," I told myself. "Make it count." Again I squeezed the trigger. I couldn't believe my eyes. The bull just stood there. I had an empty rifle and my backpack with extra ammunition was 50 yards behind me. I went into a momentary panic while debating whether to run for the moose, wait, or run for my pack. In that instant, the moose fell over. I couldn't run fast enough to retrieve my pack and get to the moose. Upon my arrival, it was obvious I had shot a "first morning" moose. One for Boone and Crockett.

About this time I could see Dad's orange hat in the distance heading towards me. He had heard the shots. I don't know who was more excited, but we were certainly two happy campers. We spent the next couple of hours admiring the scenery and paying our respect to such a magnificent animal. It had suddenly become a lot easier to slow down.

Packing out a moose is lots of work even with horses, but the ride in with the pack string and particularly the ride out through the mountains with a "first morning" moose is an experience that can never be beat. One I will always remember and relive in my mind when I am no longer able to hunt. ▲ ▲ ▲

Fred Williams with his "first morning" moose. The bull scores 141-1/8 points.