

Hunting the Shiras Moose



As they say, sometimes you can't win for losing. That's about how I felt on the last day of Dodd Clifton's Colorado moose hunt. No matter what we tried, it was wrong. Instead of turning left, we turned right. Instead of going up, we went down. And so it went.

I knew just how Dodd felt. Having hunted the Shiras moose three times, with no antlers to show for any of those hunts, I believe I deserve some sympathy. And so does Dodd. But

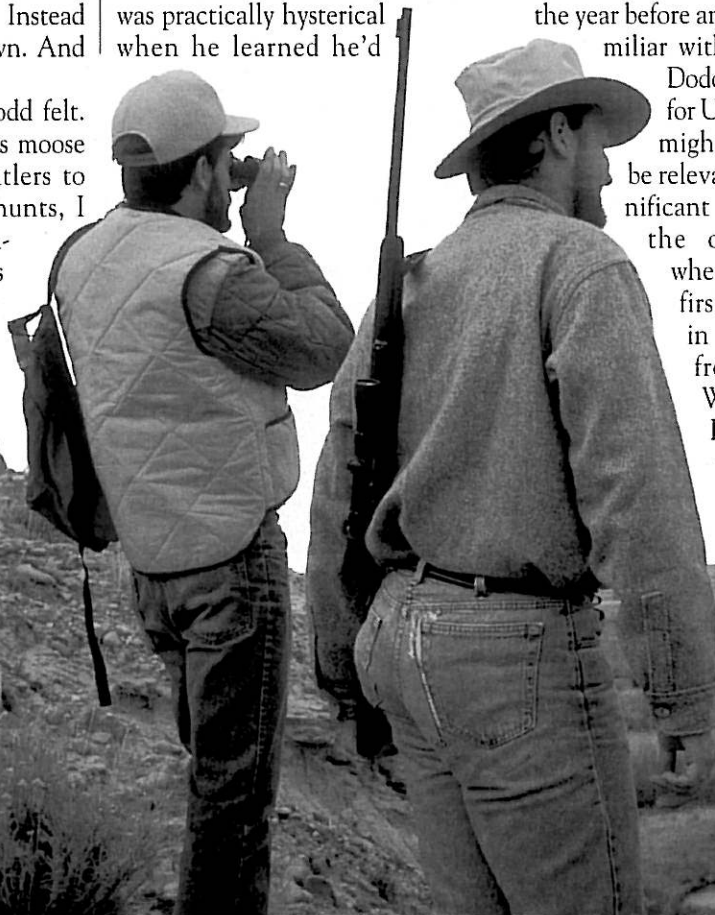
let me back up and tell his story, and then I'll tell you mine.

Dodd is an executive with Realtree, which is one of the premier camo clothing designers in America. Based in Georgia, Dodd was practically hysterical when he learned he'd

drawn a Colorado moose tag. I was equally excited, because when Dodd asked if I'd draw a map of his unit, I volunteered to go along as a quasi guide. He quickly agreed. I'd drawn a tag in the adjacent unit the year before and was fairly familiar with the country.

Dodd's tag was good for Unit 171, which might not seem to be relevant, but it's significant in that it was the original unit where moose were first transplanted in the late 1970's from Utah and Wyoming stock. In other words, this was the mother of all

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moose country in Colorado, and we intended it to be the mother of all moose hunts.

It didn't quite work out that way. I spotted a dandy bull in his bed the afternoon before the opener, and Dodd was reasonably assured that this was to be a quick and easy hunt. I wasn't so sure, knowing something about Murphy's Law — in fact, knowing quite a lot about Murphy's Law. We continued scouting, but saw no other bulls. The morning plan was to look for the bull we'd located. No surprise there.

I wasn't shocked when I saw another moose hunter already at our spot when we arrived well before shooting hours. In fact, I rather expected it. So much for that bull. We could have intruded on the other hunter, but I don't much care for that kind of competition. Neither did Dodd, so we went to look for a brand new moose.

Curiously, Colorado offers only a five day moose season, which is far shorter than seasons in other western states. That's actually plenty of time to find a moose in most cases, but not for Dodd and me. We drove, we hiked, we marched through willow bottoms, we glassed, we talked to scores of elk and deer hunters, all of whom had just recently seen a bull moose behind their camp, or in front of their camp, but we simply could not lay eyes on a bull. Mind you, this is an area where you normally see a half dozen bulls on a good day just driving around in your pickup.

One morning we hiked eight miles into the Neversummer Wilderness. A willow bottom that screamed moose lined a creek for miles, but no moose were about. An enormous amount of sign in one area convinced us to take a stand there during the last couple hours of daylight. It was not to be. While heading for the spot, we heard shots and found two other hunters working on a bull moose carcass. Those guys had ATV's and had killed the bull by hiking just a mile in from the wilderness boundary. We had begun our wilderness

hike at 4 a.m. with flashlights; they started in at 4p.m. in the sunlight. Sometimes there ain't no justice.

Neither Dodd nor I saw a bull on that hunt. I still can't believe it.

The year before, I drew a tag for unit 17, just adjacent to Dodd's unit. I would have scored on a peachy fine 40 inch bull had my wife not spotted one of the biggest bulls I'd seen during a lifetime of hunting. Problem was, she'd located it the day before the season. As you can imagine, I made a vow at that moment to hunt only that bull for the first four days. On the fifth day, any bull was in serious trouble. I'll make this tale short and tell you I passed seven bulls the first four days, including a pair of 40 inchers. And did I see a bull the last day? Of course not; not even a spike.

Want to hear a most interesting sequel to this story? After the hunt was over, I received some newspaper clippings describing a record class moose taken by a hunter near where

we'd seen the monster bull. The animal was B&C scored as the #1 moose in Colorado and #3 in the world. Unbeknown to me, the bull was killed on the first day of the hunt. Judging from the photo, I'm confident that was the bull we'd been searching for. Translated: we were looking for a ghost, a nonexistent creature.

Given the fact that my wife's parents, who live in Denver, had purchased a brand new freezer to accommodate all the moose meat from my assumed prize, I had insisted that it be she who would break them the bad news. My mother-in-law, being the great gal she is, took it in stride; in fact, she took it a whole lot better than I did.

Our luck with Shiras moose hasn't been all bad, though. The year before my Colorado hunt, my wife, Madonna had drawn a Utah tag. Given the fact that just she and I were hunting, and she is a little thing and I have a bad back, I fervently hoped her moose would fall close to the truck. It did. The

Our luck with Shiras moose hasn't been all bad, though... The author's wife, Madonna, with a 36" bull taken in Utah.



36-inch bull collapsed about 200 yards away, and we easily transported the quarters to the road with a one-wheeled carrier. Those are the kinds of moose hunts I like, especially since the bullet had gone cleanly through the rib cage behind the shoulder and we lost only a half pound of meat.

I'd drawn two Wyoming moose tags some years ago, but neither unit was known for big bulls. That's probably why I drew the tags in the first place. Astute hunters apply for big bull units; people like me apply for wherever your chances are best.

On that first Wyoming hunt I passed a 30 inch bull the first day and never saw another bull the rest of the season. Sound familiar? On the second hunt, I finally settled for a big, fat cow 10 minutes before the season ended. That was a hunt to remember because I was alone, it was 20 degrees below zero, my pickup was parked somewhere in the dark a mile away, and I had broken through the thin ice on a beaver pond in my haste to get to the fallen moose. I managed to field dress the moose quickly, breaking all records while doing so. I somehow found my truck, even though my leg was encased in a block of ice and I had to hobble along in a miserable, bitterly-cold willow swamp, and I got my truck started, though it took 10 minutes to turn the key with frozen hands attached to a body that was about to advance into bona fide hypothermia. That was a memorable hunt. Had I thought of it at the time, I would have caped that old cow and had her mounted to remind me of my only successful Shiras moose hunt to date. Canada moose are another matter, having had better luck with the more northerly bulls.

Of the three moose subspecies listed by the Boone and Crockett Club, the Shiras, also known as the Wyoming moose, is the smallest in both antler size and body weight. Even so, a mature bull will weigh in excess of 1,000 pounds, and wear impressive ant-

lers that can score well above 170.

This subspecies is unique in that it commonly dwells in extremely high elevations, frequently at timberline. I've seen moose at 11,000 plus feet, in areas inhabited by mountain goats. Though all moose are marsh oriented, the Shiras spends a great deal of time in evergreen forests. According to biologists, some moose may not travel down to winter range in late fall, but will remain in the snow-bound timber, feeding exclusively on the lower boughs of Engelmann spruce. Most moose, however, indeed migrate to lower elevational winter ranges.

Wyoming has by far the most Shiras moose, and there are excellent populations in Montana, Idaho, Utah, Colorado and Washington. Incidentally, the Boone and Crockett Club lists these states as the only ones inhabited by the Shiras subspecies. Populations across the border in British Columbia, in North Dakota, and in all states east are considered to be the Canada moose subspecies.

Moose have never been widely regarded as exceedingly wary animals. Indeed, some individuals may be trusting, allowing a hunter to take advantage of its boldness. This behavior depends a great deal on hunting pressure. Moose that are accustomed to hunters may be quick to escape and tough to find.

Bulls may often establish themselves in localized areas and remain there for weeks at a time. These are normally places with plenty of willows and marsh. Once the rut begins, however, bulls start wandering, searching for cows in estrus. A big bull may visit many cows, looking for one in heat, whereas smaller bulls tend to hang out with a cow for a long period of time, whether she's in heat or not. Breeding season is essentially the same as that of elk, usually starting in mid-to late September and running into October.

Moose normally feed in willows during the night and bed soon after sunup. Though animals may bed in the willows, I've noted

that if evergreen forests are close by, moose will often walk into the forests to bed during daylight hours, and return to the willows in late afternoon.

Hunting techniques vary, depending on the season. Most common is spot and stalk where you visibly locate an animal and then move within range. Many willow bottoms are bordered by sparsely vegetated slopes where you can gain an elevational advantage and glass the valley below. If you're hunting during the rut, you can try calling. To learn, make it easy on yourself and rent a video on the subject. Bulls and cows make different sounds. The bulls commonly grunt and a cow in heat lets out a long moan. The more I listen to moose vocalization, the more different sounds I hear. Their voices fascinate me.

One of my favorite techniques is to pick up a track in fresh snow and follow. Once, I found a pair of three-day old tracks and dogged them for hours, until eventually I jumped a cow and young bull.

Of all the western states that offer Shiras moose hunting, only Idaho does not allow nonresidents to hunt. In all cases, tags are awarded in a lottery for residents and nonresidents alike. Obviously, the choice units with the biggest bulls are the toughest to draw. Nonresident moose tags do not come cheap. Expect to pay at least \$1,000 in several states. While that might seem steep, consider what it would cost if you hunted Canada or Alaska. Many prime moose units in the west are accessible and are on public land. If you're reasonably self sufficient, you can easily hunt one on your own without hiring an outfitter, though outfitters are recommended in remote moose country.

And before you squeeze the trigger, remember this all-important basic axiom: the best moose is the one that falls on the uphill side of the road, and as darned close to the pickup as possible.

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