THE WORLD'S LARGEST DEER

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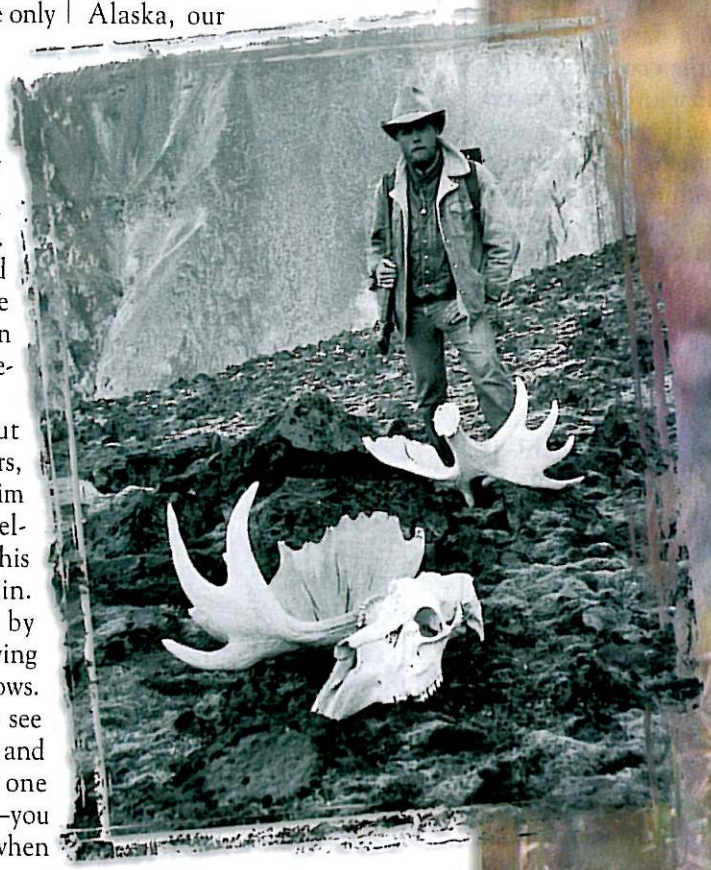
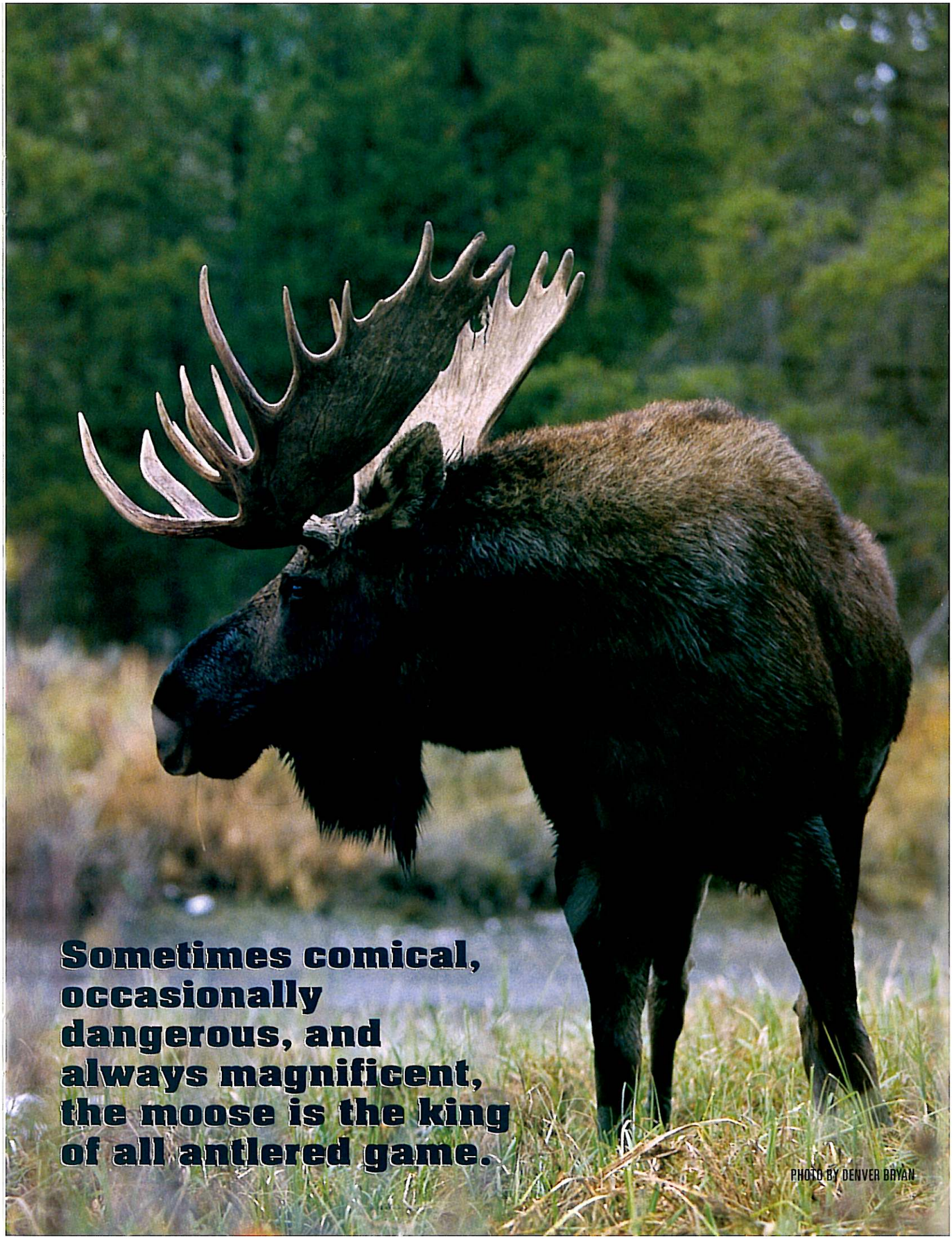
A number of years ago, while hunting Dall's sheep in Alaska's Wrangell Mountains, my guide and I took a much-needed breather on a little bench cut on a steep shale mountainside. The nearest scrub timber was far below, and the only vegetation was a bit of grass that managed to creep through the mossy rocks. There on that bench was the bleached skull and antlers of a good-sized bull moose. All other bones were long gone. Whatever drama had occurred here had taken place in the late winter; one antler had been neatly shed, while the other remained attached to the skull.

I have thought about that bull moose for 15 years, wondering what possessed him to climb so far above his sheltered valley, and how he met his end on that bleak mountain. Probably he was harried by wolves, or perhaps he was trying to escape unusually deep snows. Or maybe he just wanted to see what lay on the other side and didn't quite make it. But one thing is sure about moose—you can't figure them out. Just when you think they're an oversized, amiable, and not-too-bright deer they will surprise you.

Twenty-some years ago, when I was going through the riverine portion of the Army's Mountain Warfare School at Fort Greeley, Alaska, our



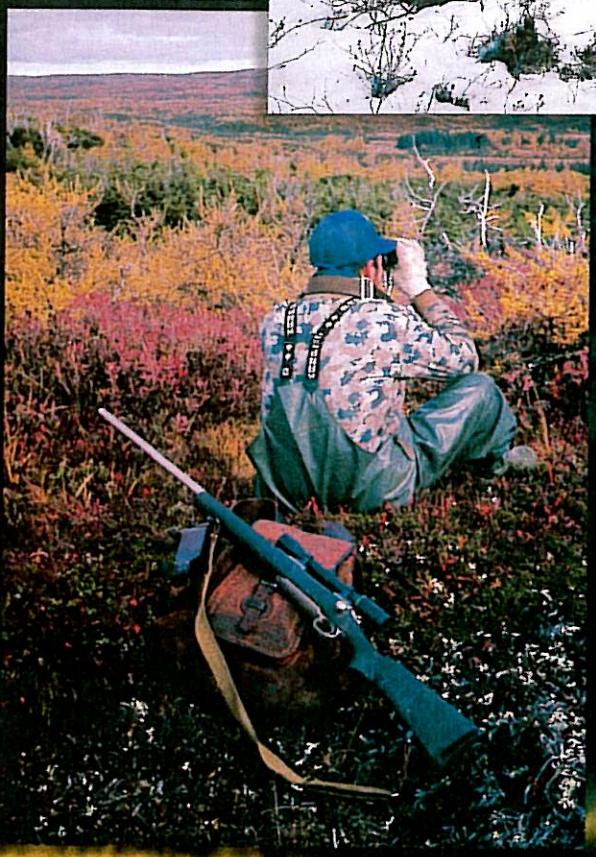
A MOOSE SKULL FOUND HIGH UP ON A SHEEP MOUNTAIN IN THE WRANGELLS. WHAT A BULL MOOSE WOULD BE DOING IN SUCH A SPOT IS COMPLETELY UNKNOWN.



Sometimes comical, occasionally dangerous, and always magnificent, the moose is the king of all antlered game.

PHOTO BY DENVER BRYAN

RIGHT: The author's favorite moose-hunting technique is glassing. The big, dark animals usually stand out at great distances, with the biggest problem being not seeing the moose but finding it again when you stalk to within range.



ABOVE: Early fall is a wonderful time to be in moose country, with wonderful fall colors on the tundra ... and, after the first heavy frost, no bugs!

PHOTO BY DENVER BRYAN

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boat came around a sharp bend in the Tanana River. A bull moose stood in the calmer water on the inside of the turn—except we didn't know he was a bull. The water rose nearly to his belly, and his outstretched neck—head, ears, and antlers—were totally submerged as he nibbled on some underwater succulents. We floated to within a few yards before the head came up—and the wall of water he threw in his hasty departure nearly capsized us.

In retrospect slipping up on that moose may not have been the smartest thing I ever did. I'm not one of those writers who places mayhem-bent bears behind every bush, and I'm not suggesting that old Bullwinkle is dangerous . . . but he's unpredictable enough that you should give him space. A friend of mine was snowmobiling along a bulldozed track in late winter, with eight-feet walls of packed snow along either side of the narrow trail. He came around a bend and was face to face with a moose. He slowed to a stop, and the moose took one look at him and charged. He had just enough time to draw his .44 and fire . . . and was good enough and lucky enough to catch the bull in the brain.

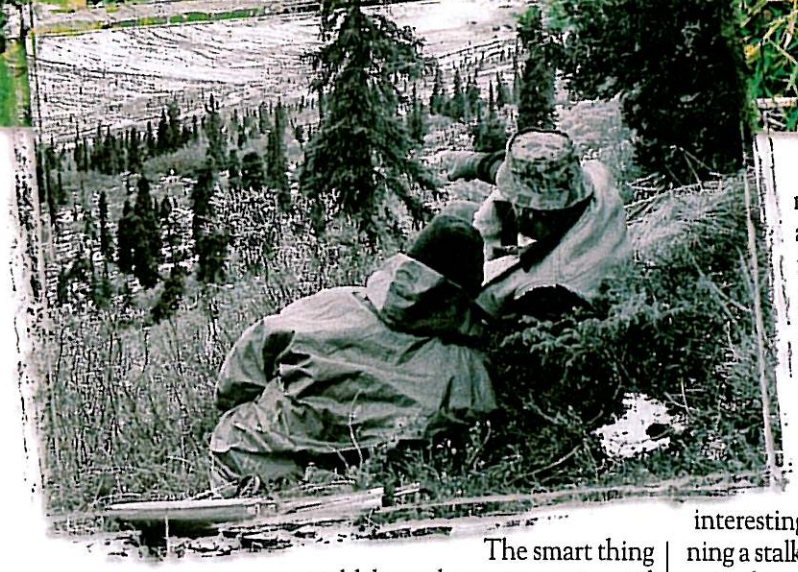
This was a Shiras moose, and of course the season was long since closed. So my friend left everything exactly as it was and made his way to a phone. He called the local game warden, gave him directions, and waited several cold hours for that wardan to arrive. The tracks of the moose heading toward the snow machine at a dead run were clear, so a verdict of self-defense wasn't hard to arrive at. But the most telling evidence was probably the head and front hooves of the moose draped across the front runners . . . .

North Country lore is filled with accounts of rut-crazed moose attacking freight trains and Mack trucks, and in Newfoundland (with the most dense moose population in North America) moose are one of the greatest road hazards. But finding a moose when you want one is often something else again. On several hunts in both Canada and Alaska I've spent days and days without seeing a single moose—while seeing dropping and tracks literally all over the place. And yet sometimes it can seem all too easy.

About 10 years ago I hiked up in the foothills of the Chugach. After some delays getting into camp and the mandatory "same day airborne" respite, we left camp in the morning with just one day of moose season remaining. The moose were in full rut at the time, and on that one morning we saw more than 10 different bulls. Most of these were seen from one vantage point, a knoll that overlooked a lovely stretch of alder-lined creek.

Several of the bulls were marginal "keepers," especially on the last day of the season. But we kept looking, and late in the morning we saw the golden antlers of a very good bull as he tended cows in a patch of thick evergreen timber. Toward midday all movement ceased, and we were certain the bull had bedded right there with his cows.

CLASSIC MOOSE COUNTRY -- WET, BOGGY, AND THICK.



ABOVE: The author's best moose was taken on the Alaska Peninsula. This is a heavy-horned old giant, with very wide palms and lots of mass everywhere. He was stalked in his bed and shot at very close range. INSET: Glassing for moose, the author's favorite technique.

The smart thing would have been to wait until evening, in the hopes the moose would move out of the timber and into the alders or an open hillside where a stalk would be possible. But on this last day of the season there was no tomorrow. And besides that, it was far too cold to wait all day. So we got the wind right and edged slowly into the timber. Along the way we bumped a couple of cows, but our luck held. The big bull stood up at 60 yards, and then the work began.

Although there may be options I'm not aware of, the techniques for hunting moose are generally glassing, still-hunting, and calling. My preference is far and away glassing—finding a good vantage point and working the binoculars until something interesting is located, then planning a stalk. A moose is a very large animal. Not only that, but his black color stands out . . . and on a sunny day his white or golden antlers will catch the light and gleam at incredible distances. There are just two problems with glassing for moose. First, you can often see moose so far away that you have absolutely no chance of getting to them, at least not on that day . . . and you may have less chance of being able to pack a bull out if you can get to him. Second, you must have terrain relief in order to glass.

Moose are creatures of the northern forests, with strong preference for swampy country with willow and alder. If there are hills and valleys and meadows you can glass. But in heavily forested country or relatively flat boggy stuff—which comprises a great deal of moose country—you may not have the vistas you need for glassing. Still-hunting, cruising good areas and looking for moose, is a viable option. But moose are big animals and need a lot of country, so such hunting can be a lot like looking for a needle in a haystack even where there are lots of moose. A better wrinkle is to still-hunt lakeshores from a canoe, or by floating along a northern river. You need to cover a lot of ground to bump into a big bull moose.

For this reason calling is generally the method of choice in level country with a lot of forest. Especially in country where moose have just as much trouble seeing

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other moose as you have seeing them, moose respond quite readily to calling. The sound is a deep, guttural grunting, traditionally rendered from a rolled-up "loudspeaker" of birchbark. It works, and is perhaps the most exciting way to hunt moose. Especially since it works best during the rut, when a wild-eyed moose is likely to come rushing in amid a crashing of brush.

The problem with calling moose is that it's like most other options for calling in game. It's somewhat rut-dependent, making the right time difficult to pick for visiting sportsmen. And if you're trophy hunting there may not be a lot of time to properly evaluate the antlers before you must shoot or lose the opportunity.

I prefer glassing, with the understanding that it isn't practical everywhere. Glassing for moose is a bit different than with many species. Simply seeing the moose isn't the problem. Sometimes they appear out of nowhere, having stood up from a bed or stepped out of heavy brush—but more often they stick out like sore thumbs. The problem is finding them once you get there.

The best moose I ever shot or am likely to shoot was a classic example. We were on the Alaska Peninsula, and we'd seen a couple of bulls but nothing dramatic. My guide, Chris Kempf, recalled a huge bull he'd seen the year before in a little valley a couple of miles away. So we hiked that way and set up on a low ridge overlooked a willow-choked basin a good half-mile across. We glassed for a long time and saw no moose. Then Chris spotted an antler sticking up in the willows right below us.

The bull was bedded tight with just his antlers sticking up. After long deliberation we agreed he was about 325 yards away, an acceptable shooting distance but not an easy shot, especially with the strong and gusty crosswind. But there was nothing to shoot at. We decided to let the moose make the first move; perhaps he would offer a good shot where he was, or perhaps he would move to a better spot. We waited for a half-hour, then an hour, and nothing happened. Then we decided to go in after him.

We marked his position as best we could, dropped off the ridge and moved downwind to circle in on him. We stumbled around in that willow jungle for nearly an hour, and the moose simply wasn't there. He must have gotten up and moved, so we backed out of the tangle and climbed back up on the ridge to relocate him.

Nope, hadn't moved. He was still in exactly the same place in exactly the same position, and we'd just plain overshot him. So we took new bearings and went in again, shooting him as he jumped from his bed at 20 yards.

The moose, good old *Alces alces*, is the largest living member of the deer family. He is not strictly a North American mammal; his tribe circumnavigates the globe in the Northern Hemisphere and is found in several subspecies throughout the northern forests. The very largest moose, in both body and antler, are found in extreme northwestern Canada and Alaska, what we call the Alaska-Yukon moose.

Now that eastern Siberia, once a sensitive area for military reasons, is open to outsiders, it has been discovered that this part of Russia produces moose that are every bit as big as those in Alaska. On a bear hunt in Kamchatka I measured a Siberian moose that had an honest-to-Gosh spread of 70 inches—and everything else to go with it. Don't start packing your bags just yet. There are big moose in Siberia, but my impression is that the population is thinly scattered, with the better hunting still remaining on the U.S. side of the pond. Moving west from Siberia, the size of moose drops off quickly until you get to the small moose (locally called "elg," which is where our term "elk" comes from) of Scandinavia. The European moose are generally smaller than our own Shiras moose. To some degree this is a function of management; Finland has the most dense moose population in the world, and the harvest, though carefully controlled, is intense. European moose are probably a smaller subspecies than our Shiras and eastern moose, but once in a while a specimen is taken with antlers large enough to make you wonder.

In North America size generally drops off as you move east. The Canada moose—including both *A. a. andersoni* from the Mackenzie River and British Columbia east to the Great Lakes; and *americanus* from the Great Lakes east to Newfoundland and New England—is definitely a smaller moose than the Alaska-Yukon moose (*A.a. gigas*). However, among Canada moose this may be a function of management as much as anything else. The moose of northern British

A GOOD ALASKA-YUKON MOOSE. THIS BULL WAS GLASSED AT LONG RANGE, THEN STALKED INTO HEAVY TIMBER. THE SPREAD IS ABOUT 65 INCHES.

INSET: OUTFITTERS OFFERING MOOSE HUNTS HAVE SOLVED THE LOGISTICS OF RECOVERING DOWNED MOOSE. SOLUTIONS RANGE FROM HORSES TO YOUNG, STRONG PACKERS TO SPECIALIZED TUNDRA VEHICLES -- BUT WHATEVER THE SOLUTION, IT'S PART OF WHAT YOU'RE PAYING FOR.

Columbia are clearly the largest of the Canada moose, but it's obvious that at some point this population starts to transition to the Alaska-Yukon variety. The reopening of Maine moose hunting produced so many record-class bulls that it's no longer clear, at least not to me, that eastern moose are smaller than the moose of, say, Alberta or Manitoba. Newfoundland, although generally managed for quantity rather than quality, produces some real whoppers every year.

The smallest North American moose are the Shiras or Yellowstone moose, a small, very dark moose that is still a monster of a deer. A mature Shiras bull moose should weigh around 900 to 1000 pounds. A good Canada moose bull should be 300 pounds or so heavier, and an Alaska-Yukon bull can top three-quarters of a ton. And of course there are tremendous variances among individuals.

Antler size differentiation is more clear- cut. Like all antlered game, there are numerous aspects to a moose rack that the serious trophy hunter must understand and learn to study—quickly. Number of points, height and width of palms, presence and size of brow palms—all of these things are extremely important in a final trophy measurement, if that matters to you. However, sort of like elk hunters talk about numbers of points (as in "six-by-six") and bear hunters talk about squared measurements (as in "nine-foot bear"), moose hunters talk first and most about spread. Remembering that spread is just one element in an official score, spread is an easy approach to moose trophy quality. With Alaska-Yukon moose, a 60-inch bull is good. With Canada moose, a 50-inch bull is good. With Shiras moose, a 40-inch bull is good. Add five inches to any of these measurements and you can say "very good." Add 10 inches and you can say, "wonderful."

And having said that, big moose are becoming very difficult prizes these days. There are several reasons. One that will come

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and go periodically is bad winters. Another that is becoming worse is an increase in wolves, which has seriously knocked moose populations in many areas. Yet another is that trophy moose hunting has received a great deal more attention in recent years. Due to this latter factor there aren't as many untouched hotspots as there used to be. And because of the first two, there aren't as many places producing big moose as there used to be.

For big Alaskan moose, I'd look to the southwestern approaches to the Brooks Range, where there is still very little resident pressure. On a recent spring bear hunt I saw literally hundreds of moose along willow-lined rivers—the most I have ever seen anywhere. Western Alaska is good, and don't overlook the Mackenzie District of Northwest Territories. The outfitters there have long overlooked their moose due to emphasis on sheep and the logistics involved with recovering moose. But due to increased demand they're looking a lot harder at their moose, and they're pulling out some monsters.

For the best Canada moose the record books are pretty clear, with northern B.C. dominating the listings. However, that isn't the only place. Northern Alberta is overlooked and under-rated, and northern Manitoba is another sleeper. For those who aren't quite so trophy conscious, the most enjoyable moose hunting I know of—and probably the most successful—is Newfoundland. Success rates are extremely high due to a huge moose population, and while average antler size is small there can be some surprises.

Shiras moose are best hunted wherever you can draw a tag, although Utah and Wyoming tend to have the edge in trophy quality. I have never drawn such a tag, and thus have never hunted "proper" Shiras moose. However, I have hunted this small, dark type of moose twice in the Kootenays of southeastern B.C. Years ago I gave up arguing where the line should be drawn. It has to be drawn somewhere, and from a record-keeping standpoint the U.S.-Canada border makes sense. However, the interesting thing was that hunting moose in the mountains, whether the Canadian or the U.S. Rockies, was quite a lot different from hunting them in the boggy valleys to the north. In that area we hunted them more like elk, and it was a most enjoyable experience.

Although a very large and strong animal, I haven't found moose to be as hardy as elk when it comes to choosing rifles and cartridges. They are, however, different. Moose seem impervious to bullet shock; I don't think you can impress them with foot-pounds or velocity. On the other hand, they don't seem to have the elk's tendency to travel for miles and miles with a slightly off-center hit. A moose is as likely as not to show no reaction whatsoever to a very good hit, and walk or trot into heavy cover and fall over.

I have shot moose with the .338 Winchester Magnum, the .340 Weatherby Magnum, the .375 H&H Magnum, and the .416 Remington Magnum. I don't necessarily think such cannons are called for. The only moose I have ever seen drop instantly to a single shot was absolutely flattened in his tracks by my Dad, shooting a little .308 Winchester. Go figure.

One time I shot a smallish bull at fairly long range with a .340 Weatherby Magnum, hardly a pipsqueak cartridge. He was standing on a little ridge across a willow bog, and I was certain I had the hold right. I shot three times, each time believing I could hear the bullet hit. After the third shot the bull walked out of sight behind some willows. Which is exactly where we found him, with a very nice three-shot group on his shoulder. This is not unusual.

Another time I was sitting on a knife-edge ridge looking down at a narrow timbered creek. A good bull walked almost directly under me, and I shot him just beside the spine and down through heart and lungs with a .338 shooting a 250-grain Trophy Bonded Bearclaw. This was a devastating hit with a devastating bullet. But there was no visible reaction other than the bull launching into a run, then piling up in 30 yards.

Based on experiences like these, I believe the sheer size of a moose demands heavy-for-caliber bullets with good penetrating qualities. But I've given up on the idea that I can flatten a moose with heavy artillery. I'd have perfect confidence in a .30-06 with a good 180-grain bullet, and I'd be much more likely to use a .270 or 7mm on moose than I would on elk.

HORSES ARE A WONDERFUL BLESSING WHEN IT COMES TIME TO PACK OUT A MOOSE. WITH HORSES YOU NOT ONLY EXTEND THE RANGE YOU CAN HUNT, BUT ALSO THE CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH YOU CAN TAKE A MOOSE.

A COLD MOOSE CAMP IN THE CHUGACH MOUNTAINS, RIGHT AFTER A FRESH SNOW. OPTIONS FOR MOOSE CAMPS ARE ENDLESS, BUT THE MORE REMOTE THE BETTER THE CHANCES FOR A BIG BULL. INSET: WHEN REMINGTON INTRODUCED THEIR .416 REMINGTON MAGNUM SEVERAL WRITERS CONVERGED ON THE ALASKA PENINSULA TO TRY IT OUT. LEFT TO RIGHT: AUTHOR, BOB MILEK, LAYNE SIMPSON, AND TOM FEGELY WITH THREE VERY FINE MOOSE AND A GOOD CARIBOU.

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A point of departure between moose hunting and most other North American hunting is the sheer logistics involved with packing out a moose. Nowhere is it more true that the work begins after the shooting is over! Although it's somewhat true with elk, it is absolutely true with moose that you simply have to be careful where you shoot one. Not only in terms of shot placement, but where on the ground the moose is located.

We can talk macho all we want about being able to pack anything out of anywhere, but packing out a moose will take even the best man at least six trips. More like eight. If you can't get him out—before the meat spoils—then you can't shoot him. This from a practical legal standpoint as well as the more important ethical consideration. Over the years, at speaking engagements and in casual conversations, I have increasingly discouraged unguided moose hunting for this simple reason. Unless you have the logistics completely figured out before you squeeze the trigger, you're a walking game violation.

That is one of the biggest differences between a guided hunt and an unguided hunt; a guide who intends to stay in business will have the logistics figured. It may be horses, it may be an Argo or other tracked vehicle, or it may be a lot of man hours for you and your guide, but it will happen. Moose hunting solo is a fool's game, and even with a partner or two it isn't for amateurs. There are good options, such as floating rivers, but whatever recovery methods are available, a great key to moose hunting is understanding that you can't hunt beyond your ability to get the meat out in a timely fashion.

Guides aren't magicians, by the way—and although they may be young and strong, they also aren't packhorses. A good guide may well tell you that you can't shoot a given moose because you can't get it out—and you'd best listen.

As you've gathered, I'm extremely high on Newfoundland's moose hunting. And yet I'm the only guy I know who has been on multiple Newfoundland moose hunts without shooting a bull. I once did shoot a cow on the last day of a hunt on an "either sex" tag, but over the course of three hunts in Newfoundland I have never shot at a bull moose. Part of it was being picky, part of it has been bad weather, and a large part has been bad luck. Part, too, has been sheer logistics.

On the last day of a Newfie hunt several years ago we went about as far from camp as we ought to go, and then we went a bit farther. We were on a long ridge that dropped away into a river valley. Across the river the ground rose again in a big, brushy ridge. Far up on that sidehill were not one but three very big bull moose. The smallest was a good bull for Newfoundland, and the largest was a good bull for anywhere.

We could probably get across the river, and we could probably reach the moose well before dark. And if we could do that, we could almost certainly get back to camp before the charter plane back to civilization landed in the morning. But there was absolutely no way we could shoot a moose and get it out. So we watched them through my spotting scope for a long, long time. And then we packed up and hunted our way back toward camp.