


A photograph of a moose in a swampy forest. In the foreground, a large set of antlers is prominently displayed, partially obscuring the text. In the background, a moose stands in a shallow stream, surrounded by dense, tall grasses and trees. The scene is lit with soft, natural light, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

**KING**

**OF  
THE**

**SWAMP**



I make a living as a wildland firefighter out of Central Oregon during the summer months. I was raised in central Washington, and my father has been putting in for a moose tag for me before I even truly probably understood what a moose was. And after roughly 20 years of applications, I received one of ten of the coveted “selected” status for the East Okanogan/Kettle any-moose tag for 2014. This is an area I have some knowledge of, because for the few years I spent outside of firefighting, I worked as a research forester for the Pacific Northwest Research Station and spent many a night in the Prospector Inn in Republic. I had seen a few moose over the course of my time there, and although it wasn’t a tag any of my mentors had experience with, I was excited.

Fire season started off slowly; we normally head to New Mexico and Arizona in May and don’t return until the monsoons push us north back into Utah, Idaho, and Oregon. But this season was unseasonably wet, and we waited, poised and ready, in Oregon. Once fire season arrived, the work was steady. I was unable to break away from my helicopter rappel crew to do any scouting; I was gone the entire month of August and 14 days in September. Moose hunting—the opener—was coming on quickly.

Fire season ended abruptly for me with a September 30th performance evaluation and exit interview on the season, followed by a 6.5-hour drive to Chelan

with all my belongings packed tightly into my Subaru Forester. I drove into my hometown at midnight with heavy eyelids. Sleeping didn’t come easily, even though I was tired.

I unpacked my vehicle the next morning and threw in the essentials for moose: my “kill” bag, map, muzzleloader, .270 (and accompanying ammunition), sleeping bag, clothing, water, coffee, homemade fruit rolls (thanks Mom!), locally grown apples, and chocolate milk. All a girl needs, really.

At this point, I was moose-bound, with the main notion of scouting some of the areas I had inventoried in 2011. My parents and I also drew the Clockum muzzleloader antlerless tag that started that day, so they were counting on me taping my trigger finger to my palm and just “window shopping.” I called one of the

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Kari is an active board moderator of [www.HuntingWashington.com](http://www.HuntingWashington.com) where she originally posted her moose story.



members of a website I'm a member of, who had contacted me about some local knowledge, but he was out muzzle-loader hunting, so his wife kindly invited me to call back in the evening to chat with him. I made it to the unit and the area I had wanted to revisit, trying to clear the fog from my memory and recall which road system and particular area I had seen moose those three years prior. I drove around reacquainting myself with the area until dusk, making friends with two deer hunters from the Tri-Cities and Anacortes, and readily listening to their suggestions for "moosey" areas in the vicinity. I then headed back to cell coverage in town to call a local friend I had met earlier that season. He asked where I was concentrating, and I told him. With enthusiasm and knowledge of the area, he pointed me to a road system roughly two miles from my nightly scouting endeavors. I thanked him heartily, and with sandwich in hand, headed back out to the area where I slept in my car under the half moon and brisk skies, dreaming of tomorrow's possibilities.

My alarm quietly hummed Alison Krauss's "The Lucky One" just before daybreak, but it wasn't needed; I was up and ready. As daylight broke, I was giddy to find the road I was traveling to be familiar. This is where I had worked and seen those moose in previous years; the small silver tag nailed to the bottom of the tree alongside the road known as the "reference tree" at the research station confirmed it. I pulled into a narrow road I had never traveled before, grimacing as the brush announced my presence as it whined down the side of my vehicle. I stopped and decided to take my muzzle-loader and camera for a walk, and no sooner than I had made the decision I was

rewarded with the view I had wanted the most—those dark, tall bodies working the far edge of a small swamp.

As I got closer and worked myself into a small opening in the brush, my heart pounded at my chest wall; those paddles! The color! A bull! He was beautiful—and broadside—at less than 70 yards, trying to push a calf off of a cow. It was decision time: Was this my moose, or not?

I knew he was big. I knew he was a very respectable bull for Washington, but something inside of me said "shoot it with your camera, not your gun..." and I had to obey. I shouldered my Thompson Center Black Diamond and then uncapped my camera. I proceeded to take photos of this magnificent critter for over 30 minutes as he raked the brush, grunted, and played king of the swamp. A smaller bull (I presume) stayed in the willows on the periphery probably wondering how he could get at that cow. Finally, the clicking of the camera caught the attention of the small calf, and all three animals walked back into the depths of the swamp and out of sight as the bull pleaded, grunting into the crisp morning air.

At this point, as my local Hunt-Washington member says, my trigger finger was aching. Did I do the right thing? Should I have taken this beautiful animal? Did I really just find such a masher on my first morning out? I was in disbelief. If I had had someone I cared about there to share that moment with me, I think the outcome would have been different. I would have taken aim at him with my sights rather than my lens, but 20 years of putting in for 20 minutes of morning air? I just couldn't do it. Realizing I might be the biggest fool ever and having shot nerves, I wandered back into cell service to

share the excitement and a few photos to see just how stupid I really was. The decision was pretty much unanimous: What had I been thinking? My parents were still busily packing for elk camp, and I couldn't bring myself to say the words, "I need you!" Luckily, another lifeline presented itself. After sending the photos to my friend Jeff from Seattle, there was an immediate response.

"How is a guy supposed to work with that excitement? Say the word and I'm there!" We chatted briefly on the phone before he decided to take the rest of the week off work and make the seven-hour drive to come enjoy this experience with me.

I spent the remainder of the day half-heartedly exploring new roads and country, but my mind was still in the back side of that swamp with those animals. I snuck in later in the day; I just couldn't stay away. I was giddy to hear a few grunts and the raking of paddles as my "king of the swamp" lorded over his land. I left and met up with Jeff, excitedly sharing stories of the day and catching up after six months of busy field seasons for us both—he in the marine world and me in fire. Who knew fire and water could get along so swimmingly?

We headed back up into the woods to my previous night's camp and slept (I use the term loosely for me) another night in the back of my car, just waiting for the daylight to break.

We were up and at it at the perfect time; the car was defrosted on this nippy 30-degree morning, and all that was left to do was hop in when the unmistakable hum of a diesel engine broke through the morning air, and a silver truck came over the horizon. Unable to possibly get in front of him, I stepped out and flagged the gentleman down. "If I might

be so rude to ask, what are you hunting?" I cried. "I'm not going to lie, I'm road hunting for mule deer," was the response. Feeling a small sense of relief, I responded, "Great! I'm hunting moose and there's one down the next left I'd like to get after. May I please have that road?" He smiled and kindly responded it was all mine. Sweet relief!

We got to the two-track road and prepared for an exciting morning. Slowly sneaking around the corner, my heart leapt when I heard a giant "snap," but immediately fell when I heard the muffled sound of a truck and saw the headlights crest the ridge. The gentleman was unfamiliar with the area and didn't know it was a loop road. He had driven three-quarters of my swamp already! I stepped aside to let him by, but he was already terribly embarrassed and reversed out the entire mile-long loop. I looked at Jeff as we sat and listened to the roar of the engine as it slowly faded into the distance.

What now?

Well, I whispered to Jeff that we should wait for the woods to settle. We sat at a spot with a good view of the swamp and just listened. I'd never wanted to hear racket in the bushes so badly, but none was afforded to me. A single branch snapped on the cutbank above us, and one set of moose tracks from the evening headed that direction, but I had convinced myself it was either the smaller bull or the calf. There was no way that bull was leaving that cow.

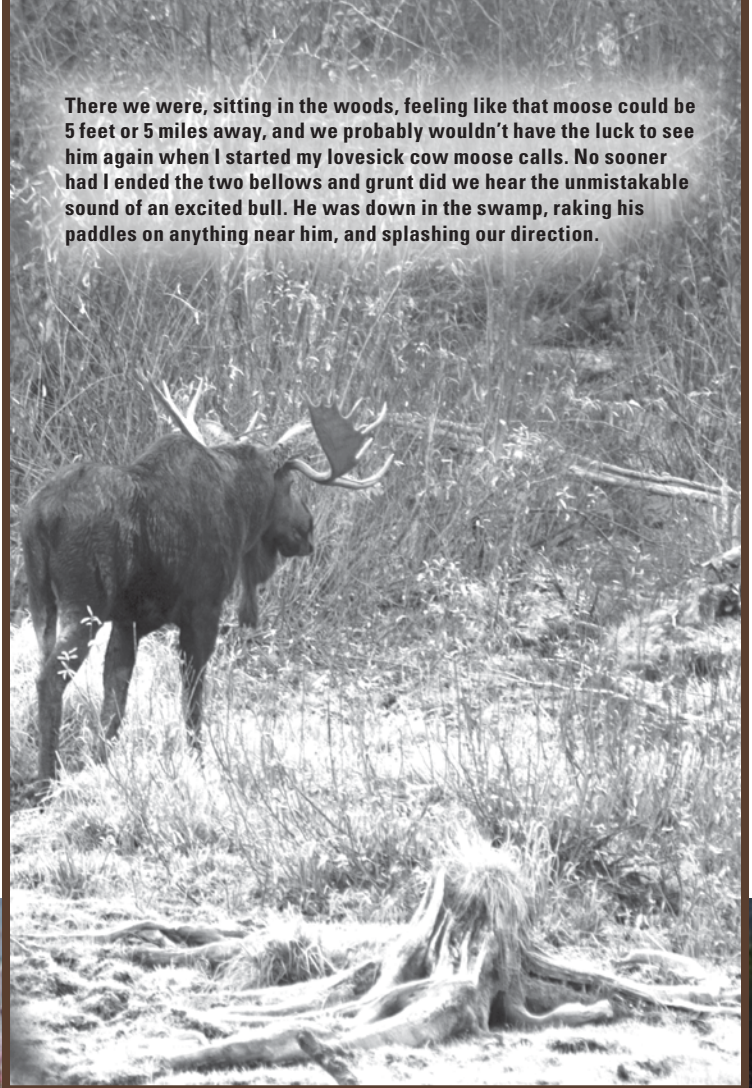
After 30 minutes of silence, we walked the road until the swamp returned to a stream-like state. No tracks, no noise, no love. I decided we should go back to the set of tracks headed up the hill and follow them. We tracked them to a large bench full of seedlings and saplings and lost them in the brushy ground. I

was at a loss. I looked at Jeff, my patient and supportive hunting partner, and whispered, "I think I want to try calling. Let's head up the hill and set up where we can see all of this." I could tell he thought I was kind of nuts, but he played along. We worked our way up the hill and sat with our backs against the large remnants of a logged stump.

Now, I should mention that at this point I had pretty much been listening to this YouTube "essential, must-know moose calls" from a gentleman out of Ontario nonstop the last two days. The previous night, Jeff and I had practiced up a storm on our way back out of civilization, laughing and bellowing our way back into the woods. I had adjusted my tone a few octaves higher and was sounding pretty decent.

There we were, sitting in the woods, feeling like that moose could be 5 feet or 5 miles away, and we probably wouldn't have the luck to see him again when I started my lovesick cow moose calls. No sooner had I ended the two bellows and grunt did we hear the unmistakable sound of an excited bull. He was down in the swamp, raking his paddles on anything near him, and splashing our direction. I told Jeff we should get to a spot where we can see the swamp, because I wasn't sure I could talk him

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**I THANKED HIM HEARTILY, AND WITH SANDWICH IN HAND, HEADED BACK OUT TO THE AREA WHERE I SLEPT IN MY CAR UNDER THE HALF MOON AND BRISK SKIES, DREAMING OF TOMORROW'S POSSIBILITIES.**



Kari with her Shiras' moose, scoring 155 points. It was taken in Ferry County, Washington, in 2014.

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out of it, over a road, and up-hill. We started to move and made it about 30 feet when it was obvious we weren't going to make it. He was on his way in—and hot! We sat; I with my back to a 12-inch diameter Douglas fir and Jeff crouched behind it. Moments after we sat down, I gave one more bellow, and tines became visible, swaying above the small saplings. The bull stopped, and for aching seconds stared our direction before starting to orbit us downslope. There was one good opening in the small trees, and I set up over my knees, looking down my muzzleloader waiting for him to arrive. He did, right on cue, and I squeezed, but met

resistance...I had been so excited I forgot to take my safety off!

I adjusted accordingly but the bull had made it through the clearing and back into the seed-sapling scattered earth. He kept working his way through the small trees searching for the cow that didn't exist. One more opening is all I had to get it done. I set up again looking down my Thompson Center and waited. My “king of the swamp” clambered into the opening, and I grunted my best grunt. He stopped, looking our direction, broadside roughly 40 yards. I squeezed off a shot and was rewarded with a thick cloud of smoke. I

stood up and started my moose bellows; as the smoke cleared, I saw him standing there roughly 70 yards away. Steam shot out of his side as he sounded like a locomotive train with every breath. I had made a good shot, compromising both lungs. He wobbled and changed directions. Fearing he was going to try to make it to his swampy castle, I put another shot in him and he lay down, drifting into silence and stillness.

I cursed, “Holy sh\*\*!

That’s my moose!”

I walked down to this beautiful animal, grateful for everything that happened the last few days. I couldn't have asked for anything better; the excitement, the company, the beautiful animal, taking it with my muzzleloader, and having the privilege of watching it the day prior. I shall forever cherish yesterday. To be one of the lucky 10... was astonishing. To have lived the last few days... was priceless. ■