

# MONTANA SHIRAS' MOOSE

BEYOND THE SCORE



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**There really isn't a North American big game species that doesn't intrigue me. Of all these magnificent creatures alive today, the moose has always been among the most common to frequent my thoughts of hunts I long to experience. Having two opportunities previously that didn't work out in Alaska and Maine, to say I was excited when my wife Rebecca texted that I had drawn a Montana Shiras' moose tag would be an understatement. The only problem was my wife, my normal hunting partner, was currently on maternity leave with our first child and this would take nearly all her vacation time for the year.**

July and August were filled with scouting as we adjusted to taking a third along on our trips to the mountains. Not a lot of hiking could be done, so much of the scouting was through glass instead of our normal boot leather. Adjusting to feeding schedules, unexpected poop incidents, and a wife whose nerves were a bit frazzled was a new twist, but we made it work.

As the summer wore on, I continued to scout and roped a few friends into hikes however much of my time in the unit was alone. I was inventorying sign and analyzing the few moose sightings I managed but as the season approached I still didn't have much to go on. The three bulls I had located did not meet my criteria for shooters.

Season opened on Tuesday, September 15, 2015. My wife was returning to

work so she had no time to go along. Fortunately my boss Jack Reneau agreed to take opening day off with me and head to the mountains to look for a bull.

At daylight we hiked into some meadows where I had earlier located a cow and calf. The morning was cool and damp and the dew was just heavy enough I should have worn my rain pants. I scoured the meadow looking for trails left in the moisture or signs that would indicate the presence of a bull but nothing was there. After an hour or so we returned to the truck and spent the remainder of the day

glassing from ridgetops and covering ground trying to cut a bull. As the day wore on, the temperature rose and the moose stayed hidden in the timbered ridges high in the unit. Wednesday, a neighbor took me into the areas he had found success in years past but only one mature track was found and it appeared he was only passing through.

On Thursday I drove nearly to the opposite side of the unit to investigate a very promising wide creek bed I had spotted on Google Earth. When I arrived it was one of those places that just looked perfect. Giant willows choked

the creek bed and beaver dams were prevalent, creating pools and swamps for a few miles. The areas of dried mud revealed tracks of deer, elk, bear, and even a few older and smaller moose. As I picked apart the creek bottom a very large black bear interrupted my evening. I had a bear tag in my pocket too, but his hasty retreat was quick enough that it prevented me from getting a shot. I knew the area held promise.

I took Friday off work that week as well. Rebecca was only back 3/4-time and also had Fridays off, so she would hunt mornings with me the next three days and our son would stay with Grandma. It was very hard for her but a welcome change that just she and I could spend a few mornings together in the woods. Friday and Saturday were warm and other than a few grouse, we saw little game. We would hike for a few hours, then I would take her back home and spend a couple hours with our son, and then we'd head out again for the afternoon. Saturday night I began to feel a tinge of fatigue setting in. I wasn't quitting, but it seemed all this effort had been for naught. I really wanted a mature bull and only one large track had been located. Unfortunately, it was in an area I felt was getting



The Spring family with their moose.

This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

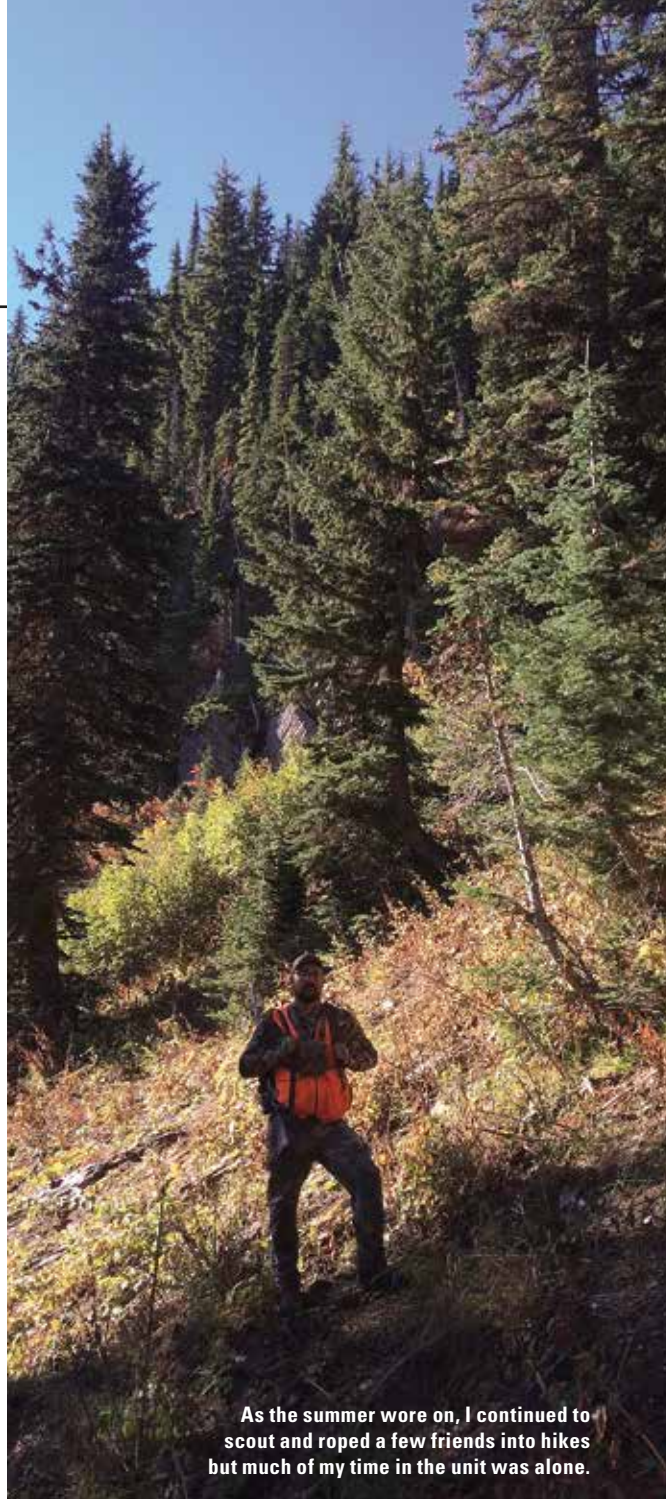
extensive pressure from elk and grouse hunters.

I considered taking Sunday off but decided to keep hammering. With this second mental wind I decided we would return to the swampy area I had found and call and hike around a bit more to see if a bull was in the area. After spending the morning down low and finding nothing any fresher than my first trip in there, we took an old Forest Service road that would take us higher up in the basin to the headwaters. After six or seven miles the road's grade began to lessen and we ended up high on a ridge overlooking two drainages. As we worked our way further out we found fresh elk sign and I could see the alders had been heavily grazed by a moose the winter before. Eventually we came to an old, overgrown logging unit and I decided to take a break for some lunch and do a little calling. I made my way over to the edge of the road, let out my best attempt at a lonely cow call, and let it echo down the canyon. Within a few seconds, from far below, I heard the distinct grunt of a bull. I quickly called Rebecca over and told her I had a bull respond. We listened for a couple minutes and again I let out my cow call. As soon as I finished, I was answered with the distinctive bugle of a bull elk. Rebecca looked at me and stated, "Hun, that's an elk." Then asked, "Are you sure it wasn't just an elk chuckle?" Still pretty excited about hearing a moose bull and slightly frustrated that my wife would insinuate that I

had mistaken an elk for a moose I replied, "I know that's an elk, and no, there is a damn moose down there too!"

She was giving me the classic wife look—alright, you're wrong but I won't say anything—when significantly closer the distinctive "mwah, mwah, mwah" of the moose drifted up the hill. I asked her to get a branch and beat the hell out of the alders when I signaled her. Apparently the second cow call really fired up the bull because not only could we constantly hear the grunt but also his paddles raking vegetation and breaking trees. He had covered about 150 yards already when I began working up and down the old road trying to find any opening below where I could get off the road for a shot. He was getting closer by the minute and now we could see trees swaying and brush moving. I still I could never see the bull.

At about 100 yards out he held up as I felt the wind swirling from my face to my neck. A moment of panic set in—had he winded me? I turned to Rebecca and waved her to start making noise. She began smashing up alders and I hit the bull with another cow call followed by a grunting sequence and the hook was set. He covered that last hundred yards in less than five minutes but I still couldn't see him. All of the sudden he stepped from the brush with his eyes rolled back in his head and steam coming from his mouth with every grunt. His right side was all I could see and it looked pretty small. I



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said, "Not a shooter." Rebecca made a comment roughly translated to, "Not a shooter, I will politely disagree!"

At this point he was standing in the road not 40 yards away looking for a fight and I could see he both of his antlers. I glassed his rack and

saw a definitive big split brow on the left and two, possibly three brow points on the right, and re-evaluated my first analysis. This bull was an old mature Shiras' moose that I had called from 300-400 yards out. I decided if he would get off the road to a place where I could get a clear shot I would take it. The next 20 minutes were awesome. He would rake alders, sway back-and-forth, and constantly grunt. Finally convinced I was not the bull and cow he had heard he turned to leave. I began following and he instantly whirled around in the road, laid his ears flat on his head, and lowered his antlers.

I slowly took a few steps back as he approached. He being satisfied with my retreat resumed his walk away. He acted as if he wanted to continue uphill, which was exactly what I needed for a chance at a possible shooting lane. When he turned and began to go up, I stepped up into the brush as well and had about a moose-length window at ten yards. He stepped into the open about 40 yards above the road. The .375 H&H roared and the bull lurched forward and disappeared. The first shot had been directly into the bottom half of the heart, but a follow up in the shoulders put him down for good. ■



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