

TRACKS TO A MISTY MORNING MOOSE



Stanley's niece, Megan, pictured with her family, passed away from cancer at 32 years old three weeks before he left for his hunting trip. This trip took on a whole new meaning after that loss.

When I first heard that the congregation I had served for two decades was going to give me an Alaskan moose hunt for my 20th anniversary gift, I just smiled. I smiled because this was not exactly a traditional type gift for a large, urban church to make, but it was so typical of this “out of the box” wonderful congregation. Little did they know the gift they gave me was a gift of a lifetime. The generosity of the congregation made the hunt possible, and then the 17-month wait to go on the Alaskan adventure was underway.

I almost canceled the trip all together a few weeks before we were scheduled to leave. The Summer of 2019 was one of the most difficult summers of my life. My sister's oldest daughter, Megan, a 32-year old wife and mother of two little ones, as well as a tremendous and beloved softball coach was losing a battle with a terrible metastasized cancer. She died on August 14, 2019, just three weeks before we left for Alaska. With somewhat of a heavy heart, yet excited about the adventure, shared with my good friend, Rusty George, who always lifts me up, we met his son Andrew who would be our guide for the 10-day adventure. This Alaskan wilderness adventure that was months in the making was needed like never expected to bring solace to an unsettled soul.

We flew from Fairbanks to a now-sacred-to-me-spot on the Titna River. We then took a brief walk with our gear from the plane to another slough that we would cross by canoe. Another short walk led us to our base camp home in the wilderness where we would be for the next 10 days. Once at base camp, I figuratively had to pinch myself to prove the reality of finally being on this hunt trip in the Alaskan wilderness. I never really thought my once-stated dream would be something I would be able to fulfill.

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.

BEYOND THE SCORE

Stanley R. Copeland
Photo Courtesy of Author

Setting up our tent quarters, I could have never properly prepared myself for the forest smells of lavender and spruce with every step on the spongy, mossy, peaty tufts while walking through the woods. The close encounters with animals—moose, bear, beaver, river otter, mink, muskrat—made me so grateful to God for a creation that we are called to faithfully steward. The sightings of birds such as the trumpeter swan, geese, and sandhill crane—all on their way south—was a glorious sight and sound. Some of the only fellow hunters, for tens of thousands of acres in this remote Nowitna Refuge Forest, were the golden eagles, bald eagles, and falcons stalking the woods and river with us. And then there was the grizzly bear sighting on the river where we hunted. He fished for spawning chum salmon that had laid and fertilized their eggs, completing their life course. The fish were dying as part of nature's life cycle making them easy catch for the bears. What a beautiful world we have been given to enjoy and about which we must responsibly and gratefully tend.

It had been an unusually warm summer in Alaska and the weather conditions, for which we were well prepared, were not to be fully experienced. We experienced a light morning frost only one day. Temperatures ranged

from the low 40s to 50s daily, with a couple of days in the upper 60s. This was perfect weather for Dallasesites escaping triple digit heat this time of year, but warmer and dryer than the animals in Alaska are accustomed to for stimulating their innate desires in early September.

Our days of hunting involved floating in a small boat that had a small 15-hp motor; the boat was lashed with spruce poles to a canoe. The three of us would float down the river in the morning where it was so quiet that it was as if one could hear the mist of the morning lifting off the water. Within 10 minutes of the first-day float, we saw a cow moose and calf on the riverbank only 15 yards away. Even though Andrew's calling simulated the guttural grunt of a bull moose and the lonely "moo" of a cow moose, it would be four days before we saw another moose. Our search for signs was daily and persistent. The most notable signs were the mud kicked up on sandbars by the huge hooves of moose and the antler-raked willows on the banks. Some of the marshy sloughs off the river were also good for stalking. These searches usually yielded a berry snack in the woods that was full of tiny blueberries (the choice of bears), tart, high-bush cranberries, lingonberries growing low to the peat-covered turf and crowberries thriving on the evergreen carpet.

A "BERRY GOOD" BLACK BEAR

On day four, we motored up the Titna River further than we had the previous two days. This was going to result in a five-hour float to conclude at suppertime, about 10 p.m., or about an hour past sundown. About two hours into our float, we quietly passed a hillside forest with tall birches in a patch beside a low-lying birch patch, which was the result of a fire about a decade prior. We thought we heard movement on the birch

hillside. Andrew instructed us to paddle to the nearest pebble bank landing. We listened, and Andrew called for about 15 minutes. Less than five minutes after we resumed our float, a large, shiny, coal-colored, boar black bear appeared on the bank on the right side of the boat. He was looking with intrigue upon us as we floated. Left-handed Rusty had a bear tag, and Andrew instructed his father to take aim, be patient and shoot true. He shouldered his gun as we continued to float and a



Stanley's friend, Rusty, had a bear tag and was able to take this black bear while floating the Titna River looking for moose.

shot rang out. The shot was true, perfectly placed and killed the bear instantly as he fell into the river. The bear rolled over as he floated with the current. We entered the water to drag him to the nearest pebble beach. He was fully mature, beautiful and the trophy we hoped we would have a chance of harvesting.

When we finally arrived to the base camp, our guide instructed us to port to the bank across the river from camp to dress and skin the bear in the flat clean area close to the water. The process went into the wee hours of the morning, and as we prepared the bear meat and hide, the Northern lights came out in all their splendor. The lights danced across the sky as if to lift our praise toward the heavens for a wonderful, unbelievable day.

MY MEGAN MONDAY

Day five was not a day for hunting; rather, it was a very full day of preparing the bear meat and hide for tanning for my colleagues, who excused me from their duties they performed in father-son fashion.

As for me, I declared the day "Megan Monday." Here I was with Rusty and Andrew working away and I was reading and meditating on this little book titled *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* by the Reverend Dr. John Claypool. The short four-chapter book was hugely engaging, and God spoke so clearly to me through it. The third sermon or chapter was entitled, "Life is a Gift." This grieving father, Dr. Claypool, said about his daughter, "Everywhere I am, I am surrounded by reminders of her—things we did together, things she did, things she loved. And in the presence of these reminders, I have two alternatives. I can dwell on the fact that she was taken away, and dissolve in remorse that all of this is gone forever. Or, focusing on the wonder that she was ever given at all, I can resolve to be grateful that we shared life, even for an all-too-short ten years. The way of gratitude does not alleviate the pain, but it somehow puts light around the darkness, and creates strength to begin to move on."

My Monday with Megan put gratitude and this great adventure into a beautiful perspective.

AMISTY MORNING MOOSE

The moose hunt continued with one of our hunting goals clearly and completely met, but would a moose be harvested? All of us were confident in our excellent guide. Andrew was confident in the area we were hunting. He knew this part of nature would produce just the moose we hoped for, though he was still hidden in the sanctuary of the marshy woods.

It was an early, misty morning that at breakfast we had remembered it to be Patriots Day, 9-11, a Wednesday. It was also a good day to chase and find a trophy bull moose. On day six, our familiar float was quiet, chilly, and conditions for hunting could not have been much better. We continued the hunt with Andrew calling in the specific places we had seen promising tracks and willows that had suffered the antler raking of a bull moose. The signs were slowly increasing as the calls were luring interested bulls to mark their turf and identify their superiority to any would-be moose intruder. We called in two locations on the Titna River as our beaver friends slapped their tails at us as if to say, "You are not welcome in our dens yet, even though you are becoming regulars through our space. Keep your distance."

As we floated quietly with the current moving us, we noticed fresh tracks and newly broken willows on the fourth swell of the riverbank off the starboard side of the boat. We paddled to the bank to get a closer look at this shoal where we had stopped nearly daily to call. Surely the tracks were as fresh as any we had encountered. Andrew said that they were minutes

or hours old in that they had no leaves, no wetness to them. The track maker had just turned up the sand with each step. We could also see on the portside bank where the big boy crossed the river, with his large hooves carrying his massive frame churning the dirt with each stride. We got back in the boats with a bit more intrigue, anticipation and readiness.

As we rounded the bank, Andrew said, "There's our moose. He's on the bank." We looked portside immediately because on the starboard side was the familiar log jam with no sandbar at all. All I could see above the low-lying willows were his massive antlers. As soon as I saw him, the boat hit a log in the river. The sound caused the moose to stand. He was massive and obviously very mature. Andrew immediately said, "He's a shooter!" and told me to chamber a round. I took notice of both statements, but my round chambering was revealed to be short-armed, and so when I pulled the trigger, I heard the terrible "click" of a misfire. I quickly chambered another round with the moose standing large and curious in the same position. My shot rang out and struck true and clean. The big moose simply took a seemingly undisturbed step and then another. I asked if I should shoot again and Andrew said, "No." Then the big moose naturally fell under his own massive weight.

We made our way to the bank, excited and elated that our goal had been reached, but more so than we ever imagined. It was obvious to Andrew, who was the only authority in our presence, that he was a trophy moose with his wide spread of antlers, broad width of palms, at least six tines on each side and two kicker tines underneath his left side palmation. The first thing that Andrew did was



While his hunting partners spent the day preparing their bear Stanley reflected on the loss of his niece, Megan. His 'Megan Monday' put gratitude and this great adventure into a beautiful perspective.

pray silently for about a minute. This was usually my role but it was part of our guide's respect of native Alaskan ways. With his hand on the bull thanking God for the harvest and the life and death of this outstanding moose, we removed our hats and the time was oddly sacred.

And then the work commenced! Wherever an 1,800-pound bull moose falls is where he will be dressed and readied for food and trophy. At about 11:00 a.m., Andrew led us in the all-day task of skinning the moose and then quartering the meat. The meat looked like a beef in size and proportion. The quarters were very heavy, the back straps were as big a human leg, and ribs weighed approximately 75 lbs. per side. All the meat was saved, which is the "Alaskan way." We cut willow branches and put them in the boats making a bed for the meat, another native practice. And when the skinning and quartering was done, the meat was put into the boats for transporting back to the

basecamp as the sun was setting, now late into the evening.

TRACKS OF THANKFULNESS

The track of thankfulness was the one we were on from this time forward. Thankful for the beautiful black bear and the massive bull Yukon moose that we had successfully—and fortunately—very cleanly shot and killed. We were thankful for a harvest of meat of which none would be wasted, and all would be shared with our friends. We were thankful for the time and goodness of a fair chase in such a pristine place.

As the hunt ended and we made our way out of the wilderness, it was clearly the way of gratitude that was alive in me on so many levels. I was thankful for sharing a picture-perfect hunt with two very good friends. The animals we harvested were more than we hoped for, and the adventures around the fair chase were the stories grandchildren will hear with eager ears.



Returning to the pulpit of my congregation and looking out at those who blessed me with such generosity and the gift of time away was simply a blessing. The healing of my heart had begun, and memories of times shared with family, with Megan, were stirring the salve of undeniable gratitude.

As a wise saint once told me, "You can never thank everyone who has touched your heart and done for you what you couldn't do for yourself. You can never show enough gratitude for everything that has been provided to you. Your response? You can only pass it on in hopes of blessing others." ■



Stanley with his massive bull moose. All the meat was saved and willow branches were put down in the boats making a bed for the meat, a native practice. The wide spread of the antlers took up the whole boat as well. His Alaska-Yukon moose scores 215-4/8 points.