

# Moose Watching



One of the most thrilling sights in the White Mountain National Forest is the ungainly but majestic American Moose (*Alces alces*). The largest member of the deer family, moose are identified by their great mass (up to 9 feet tall and 1,200 pounds), an overhanging snout, a bell of skin under the neck, and the huge spreading antlers of the male.

## Life History

Moose are mostly active at night but can be seen any time of the day. Most sightings occur at dusk or dawn. Though usually solitary, traveling singly or in small family units of a cow and a calf, several may gather to feed near lakes or streams. Breeding, or rutting season lasts from mid-September through October. Calves are born in May or June, usually one per cow, and remain with their mother until next year's calf is ready to be born. Moose have a life expectancy of 20 or more years in the wild. Some causes of death include collisions with cars, poaching, brain worm, or malnutrition due to abscessed gums from embedded wood splinters. The moose's preferred diet includes willows, water lilies, and other succulent aquatic vegetation in or near swamps, bogs, and wet forest edges. In winter they browse on twigs and bark, usually maples and aspen. Permanent "wildlife openings" and cleared areas resulting from timber harvests benefit the moose because the grasses and small trees are easily available.

## Sighting a Moose

The Kancamagus Highway and northern-most sections of the White Mountain National Forest are well known for numerous moose sightings, though moose can be found throughout the forest. Although the opportunity to view a moose along the highway is exciting, please use caution when pulling off, taking care not to startle either the moose or other drivers. Be aware that this dark-colored animal does not show up well at night and drive defensively. Moose are wild animals and should be treated as such, even if they seem tame or passive. During the rutting season, bulls are unpredictable, and cows with calves are easily agitated. Viewing from your vehicle is least stressful to the moose, and the safest for you. If you should happen upon a moose in the forest, move slowly, and avoid loud noises or sudden movement, and limit your pursuit. This will ensure an extended and enjoyable observation, and will prevent the moose from injuring itself or you.

## Tracks and Signs

Presence of a moose is evident by its large cloven hoof prints (5-7" in length) in the mud or snow, and also by large amounts of scar; the size and shape of small eggs in winter, and the familiar "cow-pie" in summer. You may also find teeth marks on trees where bark has been stripped, and occasionally in the fall, the shredded antler velvet hanging in tattered threads from a young tree. Antlers are dropped December through February and are usually gnawed or devoured by woodland rodents for their rich calcium content.

## Value

Native Americans and early settlers in the White Mountains depended on the moose for survival. Today they are still highly prized for their huge quantities of fine tasting meat and tremendous trophies (the largest known moose antlers have an 81" spread!). Because of the marked increase in New Hampshire's moose population in the last 20 years, wildlife managers are looking at ways to stabilize the growing population. Such measures will ensure enough food for all the moose, and keep them healthy and productive.