

# Rocky Mountain

National Park  
Colorado

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## The Moose



### HISTORY

Tall (six feet or more), a dark chocolate brown, and certainly less than handsome, the moose has become a favorite of visitors to the Kawuneeche Valley of Rocky Mountain National Park. With its bulbous nose, hump over the shoulder, and a slightly ridiculous looking "bell" or dewlap hanging from the neck, the awkwardly constructed moose is seldom confused with its more populous and elegant cousin, the elk.

Historical records dating back to the 1850's suggest that moose were most likely only transient visitors to the area that is now Rocky Mountain National Park. Indeed, aside from reports of a few

wandering individuals, there is scant evidence that a breeding population ever existed in northern Colorado.

In 1978 and 1979, the Colorado Division of Wildlife transferred two groups of moose (12 each year) from the Uintah Mountains and Grand Teton herds to an area just west of the Never Summer Range near Rand, Colorado.

The original collection of 4 bulls, 13 cows, 4 yearlings, and 3 calves -- all of whom were radio collared for subsequent monitoring -- prospered from the start. In 1980, visitors and staff saw the first members of the herd that had migrated into the Kawuneeche Valley at

Harbison's Meadow (near the Grand Lake Entrance to the Park), and as far north as Lulu City. True to their disposition to wander, two cow moose were sighted by rangers on the Continental Divide at the Boulder-Grand Pass just a year later. During those first several years, it is probable that most members of the herd returned to the release site to winter over in their breeding grounds.

The headwaters of the Colorado proved to be prime moose habitat when two cows and a bull wintered over in the Kawuneeche Valley in 1988. Since then, sightings occur almost daily in the summer and are not unusual throughout the rest of the year, since a number of moose now winter in the Park.

### MOOSE AND YOU

Both mature males (with their palmate antlers) and females (antlerless) can be extremely short-tempered and are, therefore, quite unpredictable. The female is particularly protective of her calf.

As one Park Ranger put the matter, "This is a wild and dangerous animal!" Rutting bull moose have charged horses, cars, and locomotives.

Visitors can most safely view moose from a distance or from the interior of a vehicle. The

moose has a top speed of 35 miles (55 kilometers) per hour--not odds most visitors would choose to challenge in a foot race! If you see a moose display the threat position of either "head high" or "head low", it is time to retreat.

## HABITAT



Moose are loners by nature and these largest members of the deer family rarely travel with more than one or two other moose companions. This semi-solitary life style ensures a larger feeding range imposed by a diet of willow and aspen browse and the aquatic plants that grow in shallow lakes. The coniferous forests and aspen groves that are typical of Colorado's Middle Park and

North Park areas provide a supportive environment for moose.

They prefer specific and individual habitats to social companionship, and the herd (expanded from the original 24 to nearly 700 in 1994) is scattered over a range that now extends southwest to the San Juan Mountains, and west to Steamboat Springs.

## LIFE CYCLE



Moose return to the same winter range with some consistency, and leave each spring to find a summer range that may be 5-10 miles (8-16 km) away.

Bulls experience a rapid growth of velvet-covered antlers through the spring months that culminate in a display of a flattened rack as much as 80 inches (2 m) from tip to tip. The velvet is usually gone by mid-September.

The rut (mating season) extends from September through November, when a bull attends only one female at a time (although he may breed with several cows in one season). Calves are born in the spring after an eight-month gestation period.

Twin calves are relatively uncommon, occurring in less

than five percent of all births. However, the local habitat and its abundant forage appear to have stimulated an above-average rate of twins.

Over a 20-year life span in the wild, bulls may reach a height of 6½ to 7½ feet (2-2.3 m) at the shoulder, and weigh from 800 - 1,600 pounds (360-725 kg). Cow moose are only slightly less imposing at 5 to 6½ feet (1.5-2 m) tall and 600 - 1,000 pounds (270-450 kg) in weight.

Impressive size and good sense of smell and hearing compensate for relatively poor eyesight when moose defend themselves against their few predators. The wolf is no longer present in Colorado, but mountain lions are here to prey on moose, and coyotes will occasionally take the sick or very young.

## MOOSE VIEWING AND PERSONAL SAFETY



Visitors may see moose at almost any time of the day. As noted, cows may travel and browse with a calf, or some bulls may wander in pairs. Each such social unit tends to establish its own range, and may stay in a given location for days or weeks, as long as food sources last and the animals are not harassed.

Moose favor willow bottoms and beaver ponds. Staff have sighted moose with some frequency in the half-mile stretch just north of Onahu Creek Trailhead, along the Onahu Trail itself, in the beaver ponds next to Timber Creek Campground, at Lulu City, and in the Big Meadows area.

If you spot a moose while hiking a trail, begin a slow retreat and yield the trail to the moose.

Be especially alert for the presence of a calf should you encounter the antlerless cow. Avoid, at all costs, coming between a cow and her calf.

If you are fortunate enough to spot a moose while driving through the Park, pull well off to the side of the road and remain at your vehicle. Keep an eye open for less cautious visitors who may bolt across the road in hopes of getting a closer view.

Enjoy the magnificent moose ... from a safe distance.

