

The Magazine for Practical Outdoorsmen

FUR-FISH-GAME

Hunting's Magazine

February 2001 \$3.99
In Canada \$4.50

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Text & Photos by Steve Sorensen

As the two kids lugged board after board up into the tree, their conversation see-sawed between building the tree house and dreaming about the future. Their dreams included hunts for exotic game in places like Africa or Alaska, far from their Pennsylvania homes. For too many boys, such dreams never come true.

But for Tom and Steve, they did.

I'm Steve. Tom was my high school buddy. My future took several turns before I ended up back in our hometown, and we had not seen each other for years. But on September 1, coincidentally, we found ourselves on the same airplane headed to Anchorage, each bound for a separate moose hunt.

"Tom, remember that tree house?" I asked. "You know, we talked about doing this." He remembered, too. Identical dreams coming together on the same day on the same plane, more than three decades later.

Tom had made arrangements to be dropped at a lake by a local pilot. My plan was to hunt with my brother Andy, a resident of Anchorage, and be flown into a remote drainage by air taxi. It was my first moose hunt, Tom's second. On his first he had tagged a nice bull.

It's not hard, and need not be too expensive, to arrange a quality moose hunt in Alaska—even from 4,000 miles away. The dream can become a reality if you are willing to work at it.

Even though I had the advantage of a brother living in Anchorage, it's easily possible to plan a hunt without any personal contacts in Alaska. In fact, I did all our planning from my home. Although Andy is an expert woodsman and knew where moose could be found near Anchorage, for the best likelihood of success, we decided to try something more adventurous.

Something more adventurous meant driving seven hours north of Anchorage and then flying 50 miles into the bush in two Super Cub airplanes, each plane hauling one hunter, his rifle, plus a 50-pound limit of equipment.

On September 3, the Super Cubs landed us on the tundra, and we set up

camp overlooking thick, wet moose habitat in a broad valley below. A small stream, interrupted by a series of beaver dams, cut through the valley. Willow patches along the stream provided the moose with a favorite food. On each side sweeping mountainsides covered by dense scrub spruce offered the moose plenty of cover.

Our first half-hour of glassing the valley with binoculars revealed five

our moose scouting was already finished. Our strategy for today was to head up over the mountain and try to intercept the wolves on the back side.

We ate a quick breakfast, then hurriedly packed what we would need for the day. But we were only 300 yards from our campsite when a small band of caribou interrupted our plan. I persuaded Andy, who had our only caribou tag, to forget about the

The adventure of a lifetime Alaska Moose Hunt

*Smart planning helps a life-long dream
come true for everyday outdoorsman*

bull moose. Then through the spotting scope, we judged all of them to be legal, even from more than a mile away.

When initially glassing for moose, you can cover more ground with binoculars than with a spotting scope. Sometimes it takes a few minutes to spot a moose; or it may take hours. Even without bright sunlight, the massive antler palms offer a vivid contrast to the dark green spruce, making bulls much easier to spot than cows. Moose generally don't move quickly unless disturbed.

Nonresident moose season wouldn't open until September 5, and we planned to use all of September 4 for additional scouting. But that changed when Andy zipped open our tent in the morning and glassed the mountainside about 3 miles to the northeast. He spotted two wolves, which seemed to be on a bearing that would take them behind the mountain where we were camped.

Alaskan wolves can pose a serious threat to local moose and caribou populations, and hunters are not required to purchase wolf tags before shooting one. Since we already had seen five legal bulls, we decided

wolves and shoot the nicest bull in the group. The bull ended up being the largest of more than 200 caribou we saw during our hunt.

That night we dined on caribou tenderloin, reminding us of a long family tradition on the opening day of Pennsylvania buck season.

The wolves? They maintained their course. Shortly before dark we saw them cross over a mountain 2 miles to the northwest.

The next morning we were up and glassing at first light, but we saw no moose from our campsite. So we hiked up the ridge to glass the head of the valley. The bulls had moved while our attention was on wolves and caribou, and we rediscovered them about 2 miles upstream. But now we saw six bulls, the sixth a real monster. He seemed to be protecting a couple of cows from the desires of the other bulls. All day we contemplated going after the big fella, but the distance from our camp kept him safe. We watched and wished all day, but had to hope for good bulls closer to camp tomorrow.

While we slept that night, two of the bigger bulls moved about three-fourths of a mile downstream, closer to our camp. The monster bull must have chased them away from his little harem.

We first saw them from across the

valley at about 8 a.m., and we studied them for hours. They still were more than a mile from camp. They were resting, gazing across and down the valley. Finally, at around 3 p.m., they began to clank antlers together, nibble on willow brush, and meander around in the spruce brush. With their attention on food and on each other, we began a stalk that would take us to the bottom of the valley and a short way up the other side.

Our plan was for Andy to do the calling, and for me to be the first shooter. We established a position equal in elevation to the moose. I set up 75 yards closer, still a quarter-mile away. Five minutes after Andy began scraping brush and grunting through the moose call, I glimpsed a set of antlers passing between spruce trees at about 200 yards. A few minutes later, I heard them scrape their antlers. Then I heard them clamber across the stream below us.

Convinced they were trying to circle downwind, I hustled back to Andy. Almost immediately, both moose came into view 200 yards away, across the stream. I looked for a place to rest my 7mm Remington magnum, but had to settle for an off-hand shot.

I shot, then Andy shot. Both moose fell in the thick spruce brush. Hurrying across the stream, we kept our eyes peeled and cautiously approached where the bulls had dropped. I was within 10 yards of my moose when Andy shouted, "To your left!"

As I turned my head, the animal let out a primal roar, stomped its front hooves into the ground, and rocked its huge antlers toward me. I administered the *coup de grace* with another 175-grain Nosler Partition bullet.

It was Labor Day, and the work we had given ourselves gave the words "Labor Day" new meaning. One moose on the ground is huge. Two are a staggering task.

A do-it-yourself moose hunt in Alaska is a sentence to hard labor, and conditioning is vital. I was thankful for the many summer evenings I had spent jogging, lifting weights, and hiking with a 100-pound pack on my back. The long hours of preparation paid off.

After skinning and quartering both moose, a job that took roughly a day, we moved the meat about 100 yards

above the kill site so that if grizzly bears came, they might leave the meat alone and go for the carcasses and gut piles. Next, we packed the animals, piece by piece, up through a quarter-mile of dense spruce and cached the meat at the bottom of two rock slides. The following day, we each made 10 more trips up through both rock slides, another quarter-mile, to a second meat cache.

The last half was the hardest. It wasn't as steep, but we were exhausted and the footing treacherous. Carrying a meat-laden pack through spongy moss and low bush blueberries is like hiking in heavy, knee-deep snow, and the ground was neither smooth nor level.

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But by Friday evening, the job of packing two three-quarter-ton animals a mile uphill to camp was at last complete. Getting the antlers was the last and most satisfying trip.

An experienced hunter from the lower 48 who is in good physical condition and willing to plan well and work hard can realize the dream of a successful moose hunt in Alaska. But don't underestimate the task, or the dangers. Grizzlies are a genuine threat, but most often the hunter is his own worst enemy. I was reminded of that while skinning Andy's moose.

Working on the thick skin covering the moose's hump, I stuck a razor sharp Gerber Gator into my left index finger at the middle knuckle. I felt the knife tip scrape across bone, sever a small artery and the digital nerve. Had we not been prepared, the hunt could have taken a serious turn right there.

A tightly wrapped bandage stopped the bleeding almost completely. To protect the wound, I added a splint made from a willow branch. After some deep breaths and a few minutes of rest, I went back to work. Fortunately, we had the foresight to

bring an antibiotic.

I still have a complete set of fully functioning fingers, though one is a little stiff and half of it lacks feeling. Never will I hunt in a remote area without an emergency dose of a general antibiotic on hand. It probably saved my finger and definitely kept a small blunder from becoming a big problem.

Even if you don't make any mistakes, hunting moose in Alaska is far different than hunting deer in the Northeast. At home, my hunting is done in two or three hours before or after work, sometimes with the luxury of an entire Saturday. Then I return to a hot homecooked meal and the comfort of my own warm bed.

But in wilderness Alaska, you'll eat from and live in whatever you can carry on your back.

Full service guided Alaskan hunts are easier and promise a high probability of success, but they can be extremely expensive, beyond the reach of the average working person. If you have a bottomless wallet, then find a top guide and book early. But for most of us, expense is the biggest hurdle.

How expensive is a do-it-yourself Alaskan moose hunt? That depends partly on how much equipment you already have. After I purchased the needed equipment, my biggest expenses were air fare to Alaska, moose tag, and air taxi. Done on your own, you may experience a wilderness Alaska moose hunt for less than \$2,500, perhaps less than \$2,000, depending on the current cost of commercial air transportation.

That's a lot of money for most working men, but not too much to save over three or four years, like I did. In 1999 when I made my hunt, a nonresident Alaska hunting license was \$85 and a moose tag \$450. After food and equipment, the major other expenses were getting myself from home to the hunting location and back.

Book flights as soon as possible, especially any flights into the bush. The best outfits, the ones with the best reputations and best access to game, fill up quickly. For a September hunt, the first of January is not too early to sign on.

To fly us into a remote drainage, we chose an outfit named 40-Mile Air and booked nine months in advance.



Andy Sorensen's trophy moose rack spanned 58 inches with three outstanding brow tines on each side.

across one or two top names in the hunting industry; it's almost a sure bet they'll be helpful. By being selective, you can pick up valuable knowledge and contacts.

Among the best books is *Hunt Alaska Now*, by Dennis W. Confer. This comprehensive 300-page manual on hunting moose and caribou gives special attention to float hunting. Videos also may help, though most videos are geared toward entertainment, not information; find one that focuses on calling.

Make a list, and check it dozens of times. I adapted a list developed by someone else, organizing everything into basic categories: sleeping, hiking, hunting and eating, plus comfort, clothes and safety. A good pair of waterproof binoculars is absolutely indispensable.

Don't plan on hunting alone. From a practicality viewpoint, you and a partner can share much equipment: tent, cooking gear, a means of water purification, safety items, a camera, rope, GPS, perhaps a radio, and that indispensable roll of duct tape. Decide who is carrying what, and don't duplicate. Weight will be critical, especially if you're flying into a remote area by bush plane.

But the more important reason is safety. It is much safer to hunt with a partner. If something goes wrong, out-

Alaska Moose Adventure

Our first attempt to book a hunt with them was the previous March, and we found that by then they had no openings for 1998. That was disappointing, because we had to wait a year. But it also was a positive sign. It gave us confidence that they were in demand and had the integrity not to book more hunters than they could serve well.

You can find 40-Mile Air, plus many other Alaskan hunting services, on the internet. I found the internet to be my most valuable research tool. If you don't have access, you probably have a friend who will be kind enough to log on and walk you through the simple search process. Public libraries also offer access. The simple search words "Alaska" and "moose hunting" will garner you hundreds of sites to investigate and produce more details about Alaska and moose hunting than you can possibly digest. You'll find information on everything from aspirin to zip-lock bags. You'll need both, and many things in between.

Your first contact should be with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game. They, too, are on-line. Or they can be reached by mail. Regardless of how you contact them, they provide

Steve Sorensen's moose had a 55-inch spread and four long brow tines on each side. To be legal for a nonresident hunter in this unit, the moose needed a minimum 50-inch antler spread or at least four brow tines on one side.

indispensable information relating to hunting units and the regulations you need to know.

Other searches may result in lists of guides, outfitters, air taxis, and lots of how-to hints, as well as the success stories of other hunters. Many hunters with technological savvy have created websites that seem tailor-made for planning a do-it-yourself hunt. These sites are loaded with advice and plenty of additional links.

Be sure to check out the discussion forums on the internet. Browsing the question-and-answer formats will produce plenty of recommendations and advice. Plus, you can ask your own specific questions and receive expert answers. You may even run



side help is probably days away. Shortly after our hunt, I learned of a nationally known hunter and host of a television show who had a major accident at about the same time as my less serious mishap. While skinning a moose, he drove a knife 4 inches into his thigh and sliced his femoral artery.

He had flown himself into this hunting area, but he was a mile from his airplane when the accident occurred. His partner was able to save him by administering first aid, then hiking to the airplane and using the radio to summon a

helicopter rescue team.

Still, the man barely avoided bleeding to death.

Be equipped to stay long enough to give yourself a real opportunity. Even if you get your moose early, you'll need four or five days at a minimum. We planned to stay 10 days and were equipped to stay 15 if weather or other circumstances forced us to stay longer. We ended up staying nine days, using every minute and almost all of the equipment we brought.

Two trophy moose and a dandy bull caribou made

our hunt a success. But the dream come true was in the experience. Two wolf sightings, five grizzlies, 10,000 sandhill cranes flying south out of the Yukon, and the stunning *aurora borealis* every night.

And Tom? This time he did not bring home a moose. But he took one of five wolves he saw, and in doing so rescued many a moose calf from its hungry jaws. Hunting in Alaska is an adventure, but it doesn't have to remain a dream.

Start planning now. ■

Field Dressing and packing out: when you truly earn your moose

When you harvest a moose, and most other Alaskan big game, regulations require you to salvage all edible meat. Alaska enforces these regulations and does not smile on careless hunters—one more reason to take hunting seriously when in Alaska.

But the first thing you'll do after making a kill is the camera work. Perhaps no trophy is more important than a good photo of you with your moose, right where it fell. Take plenty of pictures, and enjoy the moment. Pause to take a few photos while working, too. If you end up leaving some bloodshot meat behind, photos can serve as a record that you did your duty with regard to game laws.

A moose comes apart like a whitetail, but you won't be dragging a whole moose anywhere. You can't even roll one over. You butcher one where it lies. Although you can do it without gutting the animal, it is smart to remove the entrails first. Doing so allows the meat to cool much faster.

Take extra precautions if you're in grizzly country. Once you begin, you increase the scent in the area, and you catch the attention of any downwind bears. Don't get too absorbed in the job. A grizzly can surprise an unwary hunter. As quickly as you can, move the meat 100 yards from the kill site, because the kill site is where the strongest grizzly-attracting odors linger. If you're lucky, a bear won't find the carcass until after you've removed all the meat. But if a bear should insist on a protein dinner, make sure it's moose protein.

You'll need several sharp knives, a saw that will cut bone, and ample game bags. All the meat must go into game bags. They keep the meat clean and prevent blowflies from laying eggs on it. Bring plenty of bags. We ran out and had to make one by tying off the neck and armholes of a cotton T-shirt.

In many places you won't be able to hang the meat in trees, so find a place to lay it on the ground where air can circulate around it. This dries the outer surface, forming a skin which helps to seal out bacteria. If the sun is shining, find a way to keep your meat in the shade.

To skin a moose, first split the thick skin on the hump. Go forward to behind the antlers then backward all the way down to the stubby tail. Take out the loin from one side and



Andy stops to glass from the second meat cache, still 1/2-mile from camp. Late Friday, from this same spot, Andy and Steve watched four grizzlies take over the stripped moose carcasses.

put it in a game bag.

Proceed with the skinning down the front and hind quarters, and separate the quarters from the rest of the carcass.

Use your saw to cut off the legs; as much as possible, use the knife to separate the quarters at the shoulders and the hips. Once a hind quarter is removed, you can reach inside the body cavity and remove the tenderloin. Remove the ribs and the neck meat, and you're ready to turn the brute over.

We had to cut some brush to perform that feat, and turning the animal with half the meat gone was still as much as we could handle.

You perform the same operations on the other side, being careful to keep dirt, blood and other body fluids off the meat. Should you bone out the meat? The advantage of boned meat is that it is much lighter to pack, but the disadvantage is that you expose more meat to bacteria. If the weather is cool enough to reduce the risk of spoilage, you may want to leave as many bones behind as possible.

In some hunting units, it is illegal to bone out the meat. Regulations also require that antlers may not be removed from the kill site until after all edible meat is removed. Alaska enforcement officers sometimes fly over a kill site. If they see antlers at your camp site and meat at your kill site, you may be in for serious trouble. It is your obligation to know and follow all of the regulations. ■