

# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### MOOSE

*Alces alces*

#### Background Information

New England's moose population has expanded over the past decade leading to increased sightings in Connecticut. Between 1992 and 1998, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP)

Wildlife Division received reports of two to three moose sightings each year. Bulls, cows and calves have been seen. Most sightings have occurred in spring and fall. With a growing moose population in neighboring Massachusetts and the propensity for moose to disperse over long distances, it is only a matter of time before a resident moose population becomes established in our state.

Moose are native to Connecticut, but were never very common. In the 1600s, much of Connecticut was forested, providing adequate habitat for a small moose population. Later, when extensive land was cleared for agriculture by the early settlers, moose disappeared from the Connecticut landscape.

Presently, more than two-thirds of Connecticut is forested again and moose are making their way south into this forested habitat.

#### Range

The North American range for moose extends south from Canada into the northern United States from North Dakota to New England. They also occur in the Rocky Mountains south to Utah.

#### Description

Moose are very large animals with long, slender, grayish-white legs. They may stand over six feet tall at the shoulders and can weigh up to 1,400 pounds. Females (cows) are smaller than males (bulls). On average, cows weigh 750 pounds while bulls weigh 1,000 pounds. Both cows and bulls have variable coat colors ranging from tan to blackish-brown, depending on their age and the season (an annual molt occurs in spring). Males have a black face while the female's face is brown. Both have a skin flap or "bell" underneath their throat with the bull's noticeably larger than that of the cows.

Adult males have impressive antlers which are shed annually. They begin to grow in early spring and are fully developed by late summer. Males scrape the velvet off the antlers by rubbing against trees and shrubs. These palmately-branched antlers can weigh close to 60 pounds and spread to more than five feet across. Male calves sometimes develop "button" antlers and yearlings usually develop "spikes."

#### Habitat and Diet

Moose live in forests. They eat buds, twigs and leaves from a variety of shrubs and trees, including birch, maple and cherry. In spring and summer, moose may be found foraging for aquatic plants in wetlands.

#### Life History

The moose's breeding or "rutting" season begins in September. At this time, a bull's neck swells, the bull feeds very little and will often lose a considerable amount of weight. Both bulls and cows travel in search of a mate. Bulls can breed as yearlings but older bulls



*Moose live in woodland habitats and have expanded their range into southern New England.*

usually dominate breeding activities; cows breed at one-and-a-half years old. During the rut, sparring matches may occur between bulls as they defend their right to mate with a cow. These matches can be aggressive encounters, often resulting in injury and, sometimes, death. In late May or June, following a gestation period of about eight months, cows give birth to a 20- to 25-pound calf. Twins are not uncommon. Although helpless at birth, calves become more agile after a few days. Calves grow rapidly and will remain with the female during the first year. Moose can live up to their mid-twenties but are susceptible to parasites, disease, malnutrition and, in populated areas, collisions with automobiles. In New England, there are no predators capable of taking a healthy adult moose, but elsewhere in their range, grizzly bears and wolves are predators.

## Interesting Facts

Moose are the largest members of the deer family, Cervidae. Their tracks are heart-shaped, like a white-tailed deer, but measure from four to over six inches long and three-and-one-half inches to five-and-three-quarters inches wide. Alaskan moose are the largest.

The moose gets its common name from the Algonquins, which means "eater of twigs" and "one who strips the bark off of trees." Its scientific name, *Alces*, means "elk."

Bull moose make rut pits for use during courtship. The pits are dug with the front hoofs and then urinated into. Receptive cows often step into the pit and vocalize to the bull moose. Moose vocalizations include grunts, moans and whines.

Moose have a strong sense of smell and hearing but their eyesight is poor. They are very fast runners, and have been clocked at 35 to 40 miles per hour.

An average moose can eat 40 to 50 pounds of food each day. A nursing female may eat over 60 pounds of food each day. It is not unusual for a moose to strip bark from trees when food sources are low.

One of the greatest mortality factors for an un hunted population of adult moose is the meningeal worm, a parasite of white-tailed deer. This parasite attacks the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Although not fatal to white-tailed deer, it is deadly for moose. The parasite passes from deer through its feces, which are then eaten by snails. Moose obtain

the parasite by inadvertently ingesting snails when browsing on vegetation.

## Moose Management

Moose can present a serious threat to public safety under some circumstances. Although usually shy, moose can feel threatened and become aggressive during the rutting season or after calving. They also may demonstrate unpredictable behavior if they wander into populated areas. Under no circumstances should moose be approached. Although they may appear to be docile, moose should be given the healthy respect that New England's largest land mammal warrants.

Moose are also potentially dangerous when involved in automobile collisions. They are very large, long-legged and difficult to see under low light conditions (moose are most active at dusk and at night). Data collected from other states indicate that a moose/car collision is 30 times more likely to result in a human death than a deer/car collision. On the average, one out of 50 moose/car collisions results in a human fatality.

The DEP's primary concern regarding moose is public safety. Each moose sighted in the state is monitored. The DEP's Wildlife Division and Conservation Law Enforcement staff evaluates the potential threat presented by moose at a specific location in coordination with local health and safety officials. A recommendation (no action, hazing, immobilization or euthanasia) is then made to the DEP Commissioner, who will make a final decision on a course of action suitable for a particular moose situation.

Moose represent a dilemma for wildlife management officials. Connecticut does have suitable moose habitat in some portions of the state. The return of this wilderness species to Connecticut is a testament to the health of our environment. On the other hand, moose that wander into populated areas or onto roadways may threaten public safety. When such situations occur, officials must evaluate and choose from a limited number of response options. The moose population is expected to rise dramatically in Connecticut over the next decade. The level of public awareness, knowledge and acceptance will, to a large extent, determine how well humans and moose can coexist in our heavily developed state.



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