

Making tracks in the

LAST WEST PLACE

A moose hunt in the Snowies helps a backcountry horseman reconcile his place on a once-cussed metal steed: the side-by-side

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAN AADLAND

It was all there that crisp late-September Montana morning, a skim of ice on the stallion's water bucket, new snow on the Beartooth Mountains and, most important, heady anticipation of a long-planned hunt. I would travel south through Wyoming stem to stern, Cody to Saratoga, where I'd meet my son David for a moose hunt years in the planning. He would be the hunter, I the huntsman, a role I've come to enjoy in these later stages of an outdoorsman's life.

Dan Aadland leans against the side-by-side he once despised. As a lifelong backcountry horseman, Montana rancher, equine author, trainer and breeder, he couldn't believe he was going moose hunting on wheels instead of hooves.



Rife with anticipation, I loaded every piece of emergency gear on my list, plus many that weren't. We'd live this trip in the comfort of the small camper that rode on my pickup bed, the truck in turn attached to a shiny, nearly new horse trailer.

But something was missing. Across the electric fence, lined up like Marines, were my black gelding, Partner, the smallish mare named Tess, and the two mules, Beauty and Zorro. They watched the preparations intently. Certainly they must have thought I'd next be grabbing halters and lead ropes and catching each in turn, tying them to the trailer, then, at last, loading them up for the trip.

But they would not be going. The shiny white horse trailer instead would carry a side-by-side utility vehicle. Yes, a lifelong backcountry horseman, Montana rancher, equine author, trainer and breeder, I'd be traveling through the Cowboy State with the very sort of off-road vehicle I'd frequently cussed. In a feeble effort to save face, I threw my cowboy hat into the back seat.

For years we had planned this hunt for the Bighorn Mountains, where I'd twice met David, horses in tow, to hunt elk. But the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's tag-drawing computer wouldn't cooperate. As David's preference points grew he'd tell me confidently that odds were strong he'd draw a cow

moose tag for the area. But something else was happening as well. The license quota was steadily diminishing, until odds were slim. We weren't surprised, knowing there was concern for moose populations nationwide.

The silver lining lay in the mountain range west of David's Laramie home. The Snowy had proven to be a first-rate moose habitat, and the license quota there was generous. For a hunt in the Snowies, David's preference points really counted, and the reward for his patience came through — we'd be looking for a cow moose come fall.

IN OUR VALLEY in south-central Montana, I was the very last rancher to acquire a four-wheeler, and later, a side-by-side utility vehicle. I prided myself in breeding and training good horses, and I believed the more ranch tasks I performed with them, the better they'd be. But age and the need for efficiency caught up with me, and I eventually succumbed. First a four-wheeler, then a side-by-side whisked me through ranch chores, crossed irrigated fields without making ruts, and generally eased my work load. But these were work machines. Hunting meant mules and Deckers, wall tents and highlines, panniers and manties.

On a scouting trip to the Snowies (always a fringe

benefit of success in special license drawings) we came to a certain conclusion. The area David's friends and research had pointed toward wasn't horse country, at least in the current era. ATVs were allowed here. Their trails crisscrossed the area, and it was obvious hunting with them was the norm. The beauty of the

place was stunning, but it was clear that getting beyond earshot of the "putt-putt" of internal combustion engines would not be in the cards. And neither would horses.

So, the horseless horseback hunter headed south, crossing the state line with its Cowboy State welcome. Cody meant a fill-up of diesel and the obligatory stop at Buckstitch Canvas to smell the newly-minted saddles and canvas wall tents, though I needed nothing. No time for lunch at the Irma. I'd push south, before dark I wanted to be in camp with my son.

On to Meeteetse, then Thermopolis, which meant a fill-up of coffee at McDonald's and the usual regrets — I've never found time to enjoy the hot springs. There was awe, as always, at the drive up

Wind River Canyon, and stark admiration for the native people and first Europeans who dealt with it. I can't drive through it without thinking of those whose horses sniffed its edge when they suddenly reached the gorge while traveling west. What then?

The names of the towns through central Wyoming, those on my route and those nearby, roll off the tongue to the accompaniment of musical themes from Western movies: Grass Creek, Bonneville, Shoshoni, Sweetwater, Muddy Gap, Medicine Bow, Encampment. In this poetry the stories of natives, immigrants, soldiers leap from past to present.

But for me, a Westerner, it's the terrain that sticks in my mind. Big, open, alkali flats, dryland expanses dotted in the distance with the rump patches of pronghorns, and always somewhere on the horizon,

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Even with his moose tag in his pocket, David pauses to take in the Snowies' October landscape.

snowcapped mountains. This is the West, desolate only in the eyes of urbanites who have never walked or ridden a horse over it.

As a Montanan, I won't give up the moniker "Big Sky Country" or the more recent, "Last Best Place." But Wyoming, I think, both culturally and topographically, deserves the title, "Last West Place."

SOUTH OF SARATOGA, David stands waiting by his red pickup after we make spotty cell phone connections. My professor son is too young, from my perspective, for the invading gray under his hunting cap.

We caravan into a campground, eyeball the restrictive spaces, but are attracted instead to a clearing a quarter-mile long with just one small camp set up at its head. We pull into an area with a well-used fire ring, well away from the existing camp. David walks up to the sole hunter who occupies it to ask whether our camper 200 yards away will crowd the man.

"Hell, no," he seems baffled by our courtesy. "Won't bother me."

Unknowingly, he has earned a beer.

THE BEAUTY OF the Snowy Range the first couple of days in October will always be with me. Every scene is framed with golden aspens and bright red buckbrush, while the grasses retain a hint of summer green. On the high flats the scent of sage, perfume to a Westerner, mingles with the fresh smell of autumn leaves. Here and there are disintegrating horse corrals, and I think of my stock back home.

David and Dan scout across the Snowies via OHV and foot. Although they found signs of moose, without snow to help them track, they were forced to cover as much ground as they could and cross their fingers.



Shiras moose in Wyoming and Montana are where you find them, and that's not always where you'd expect. Many years ago I drew a permit for south-central Montana, in an area where we'd always see moose on rides and day hikes before wolves entered the landscape. My wife Emily helped me pack in camp, and then I went solo with saddle and pack horses,

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expecting a choice of bulls in the marshy moose meadows where I'd always seen them. But for several days no fresh track could be found. Then, after a violent storm that half destroyed my tent and left a skiff of snow on the Forest Service trail, the moose were suddenly there.

Here in the Snowies we hopscotch for a couple of days, driving the ATV trails, stopping at likely spots, hunting for and usually finding moose sign. On the first day, as if to toy with us, we return to see above our friend's camp a nice young bull moose silhouetted less than 50 yards above the hunter's tent. Off limits to us, the bull checks us out, then departs in that ground-eating trot for which moose are famous. All we can do is laugh.

Though we hear of more moose in the following days, we do not see them. Other hunters are helpful, but chasing down their leads seems futile. Lacking tracking snow, the best tactic seems to involve just what we're doing — cover lots of ground with short hikes in likely places and hope for hunters' luck.

Eventually it happens. Far in front of us along a road a single cow moose grazes, then picks up her head and purposefully trots into the deep timber above. Decision time. Does David start his stalk from here, near where we spotted her? We elect the

opposite. We'll drive on by, past a low timbered ridge, stop, launch from there. I'll stay near the road, listening. One hunter in the brush will make less noise than two.

I figure David's chances at about 50/50. Moose move through deep timber with an effortless grace. If the cow is determined to relocate, David will likely never see her again. But if there's good feed ahead, she may stop to graze. Or, David may succeed in getting in front of her and be fortunate enough to cross paths at just the right time.

I wait perhaps half an hour, too long for my restless nature, before hearing David's .35 Whelen boom twice in quick succession. Then I pick up gear I suspect we'll need and head into the deadfall. After a couple hundred yards I meet David, excitement written all over him. He says, "We can't use the sled over this stuff. We'll have to pack her quarters over all this deadfall."

I quietly groan.

While he fetches additional gear, including the sled just in case, I find the beautiful animal, a dry young cow moose, pure caviar. She's larger than the young bull I got by myself many years ago. And, I notice something that David, in his haste, has overlooked. A quarter-mile away, across this marshy clearing, I can discern a logging road. If we can get the OHV to that point ...

It all happens just that way. The work begins when David returns. With darkness coming soon, we believe the quarters will cool without skinning and stay cleaner to boot. Even with two of us it's sweaty labor, and at one point David reflects on what he knows of my moose long ago.

"So you did this by yourself, skinning the quarters to boot, and packed them out on the horses?"

"Yup."

"You must have been a stud in those days."

I don't protest.

The sled works well on the mossy grass, one quarter at a time, encircled with multiple half hitches the same way I drag poles at home. Soon the beautiful meat is hanging on the shady side of the horse trailer back in camp, the temperature now safely dropping. Our neighbor above answers the call for a celebratory beer, then, when he plops down in the lawn chair asks (since he hasn't noticed the quarters), "What are we celebrating?"

It has not been a backcountry hunt with wall tent, horses and mules. But it's been very fine, nonetheless. The meat is wonderful, the memories poignant. I head back to Montana wishing the moose herd of Wyoming's beautiful Snowy Mountains the most promising possible future.

—Dan Aadland ranches and writes in south-central Montana. He's the author of "In Trace of TR: A Montana Hunter's Journey," and eight other books.

The shady side of the horse trailer at camp is the perfect place to cool quarters.



David Aadland harvested this cow moose in the Snowies. Some mossy grass made hauling the moose quarters back to camp easier.

