

Get Wild: Moose on the loose

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Frances Hartogh
Get Wild



A bull moose is photographed in the Rock Creek drainage north of Silverthorne in June 2014.
Photo by Doug Spainhower

Only 20 years ago, spotting a moose in Summit County was a rare event. But thanks to a 1978-79 introduction of shiras moose by Colorado Parks and Wildlife in northern Colorado, our local moose are thriving today.

Where are they?

As we enter summer, moose descend from their winter habitat on south-facing slopes to marshy areas near streams and lakes. Some local moose hangouts include Miners Creek above Frisco, Salt Lick Gulch near Wildernest and the Peak 6 to Peak 9 areas around Breckenridge. Moose frequent creeks with willows but can be hard to spot if grazing, which they sometimes do while kneeling.

Think big

The Rockies' biggest mammal, shiras moose can weigh over 1,000 pounds and be 6 feet tall at the shoulder. Their antlers (males only) can be 5 feet wide and over 60 pounds! To reach that size, moose consume 50 to 80 pounds of food per day. While in wintertime that's mostly twigs and branches ("moose" is Algonquin for

“twig-eater”), moose gorge on lush, riparian plants in summertime.

Swimming anyone?

Moose have hollow hairs that insulate in winter and provide buoyancy for swimming. They can dive to 20 feet and hold their breath for up to a minute – convenient for chomping nutritious underwater greenery.

What is that thing?

Adding to a moose’s unique appearance is a chin appendage called a dewlap. Both males and females have dewlaps, but it can be up to 20 inches long on males. Scientists aren’t sure of the dewlap’s purpose, but bull moose have been observed “chinning” females with their dewlaps during mating season, which transfers the bull’s scent. Dewlap size might also indicate dominance.

At a glance

Parks and Wildlife’s [helpful hints](#):

- Moose see dogs as predators and will attack.
- Always keep your dog on a short leash and under control.
- Females will defend their calves, and bulls will defend their territory.
- Be aware of your surroundings and do not surprise a moose.
- If a moose reacts to your presence, you are too close.
- Take photos and watch moose only from a distance.

Who scares a moose?

Wolves and grizzlies hunt moose, and although Summit County doesn’t have these predators, moose perceive dogs as wolves and sometimes will attack. Sadly, moose do fall victim to motor vehicles, so it’s welcome news that the Colorado Department of Transportation plans to add additional road crossings for wildlife.

Parks and Wildlife issues a few moose hunting tags each season. But perhaps the biggest challenge to moose is climate change: The same coats that keep them warm in the winter and buoyant in water can cause overheating when temperatures rise.

Gentle giant?

What’s our most dangerous local wildlife? Moose cause more attacks on humans than any Colorado predator species. Moose may look slow, but they can run 35 mph, or 7 mph faster than an Olympic sprinter. Moose will stand their ground and charge when feeling threatened, especially during the summer when protecting their young. If you have any doubts, check out the Parks and Wildlife video “[Moose Attacks are Increasing](#)” on the agency’s YouTube page.

Parks and Wildlife warns that dogs are the biggest safety concern. The agency reports numerous cases of moose chasing unleashed dogs back to their owners resulting in serious injury to owners and pets. And remember that in our local wilderness areas, Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Creek, dogs must be on a hand-held leash at all times.

Moose have good hearing but limited eyesight, so make noise when nearby. Parks and wildlife cautions that if a moose is lowering its head, swaying back and forth, raising its hackles (neck hairs), folding its ears back, snorting or licking its lips, it's time to get away fast! If charged by a moose, run or put something large between yourself and the moose, such as a rock or tree.

Here's hoping you get to see a mighty moose soon. But remember moose need their personal space, so grab your binoculars or telephoto lens and view from a safe distance.



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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a volunteer wilderness ranger and board member for the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit Counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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