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THE ELUSIVE MOOSE

Shooting As a Safe Sport.

by

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Kodachromes by William L. Finley

We were after moose, a big bull moose, and no lesser trophy would suffice. So far we had come off with chipmunk sized game. It was mid-summer. We were in that green valley of the Snake hung up under the towering Tetons, which reminded one of over-sized toothpicks trying to prick the sky. Under our feet smothered in lush grass, deep blue gentians showed their fringed faces. A clear young streamlet wriggled its way from *somewhere down a precipitous bank to the ever continuous green river. We stepped gingerly along, trying to be as noiseless as the wood folk.* But no one could hope to tread with such ghostly silence as the moose. I felt moose, I almost saw moose.

Watching closely, I caught a slight movement in the trees and underbrush across the river. We stood still behind a thin screen. There was surely a stirring over there. Minutes went by, and then the tip of a black antler pushed through. It was seen, then gone. Moose are so slow and make one wait so long. The big head finally emerged, the round snout raised high to snip off willow leaves. At last! Would he be the big one?

A half hour later the chunky, black form descended on a steep slant, head down, and unfinished tailless rump above. He walked liesurely into the water, took a deep drink, and for some minutes stood stock still as if saturating himself with the coolness and quiet. And he was big. He would do.

A little later he loitered aimlessly down stream, swimming through the deeper pools and slanting across to our side, stopping frequently to shove his muzzle under for water plants. No worries or war on his dull mind. He was some distance below us now, and his back was to us.

Keeping behind the bushes and almost crawling, we edged down toward him. Sometimes we saw him, sometimes he was under the bank. It seemed an eternity of waiting. Which way would he go? He was big enough for a sign post, and as elusive as a shy bird.

By this time it was middle afternoon and we were anxious about pictures. Why couldn't he be more considerate and come out in the open? All at once without the rattle of a pebble as he climbed the rocky bank, he lifted himself over the rim and stood there, a somber silhouette against the green of the trees, not fifty feet ahead of us. We flattened and lay breathless. I felt as if I had no covering and must surely be discovered. It soon became unbearable not to know what he was doing, so I raised my head and squinted through the grass.

"He's gone!" I said in surprise. "We must follow him."

It took some scuttling to move along, and I was a little shaky. But we saw him at last. He was plodding deliberately, but as if he had some place to go. He seemed quite oblivious that human beings were dogging him. For an hour and a half we trailed him. The river bank had flattened out and we were walking almost at the water's edge. He visited little brushy pools and fed as he wandered. Once we glimpsed him among the water lilies with his head clear under. Stalking and sneaking, we kept up with him, but out of sight -- so we thought. At last he struck off across a grassy field, and then he quickened his pace. Going up a little rise, he vanished in the thick timber.

He was harder to follow now, for there was no brush. But he never looked back. And somehow he gained on us till we were going blindly. We found him in a hidden little lake surrounded by a fringe of trees. He was standing in the middle of the clear, shallow water that caught the green about it. His shadow wobbled grotesquely on the surface. As we came up, he turned calmly and looked at us with an expression that seemed to say, "I wanted to be alone." And we thought he didn't know.

Ignoring us, he went on with his evening meal. Thrusting his long, bulbous nose down, and opening his pear-shaped nostrils, he gave a resounding blubber that sent circles of ripples around his sturdy legs. *It was a picture of supreme contentment.*

Dropping over camera packs, we seized up the chance for a picture, and the slant of the sun. It would soon go down. The light meter registered much too low. But it was harrowing not to get this.

We walked around the edge for different views, the old moose glancing up at us from time to time, indifferent, unseeing, as if we were mere nuisances to be tolerated. Yes, we were very close to him, and the lake seemed to grow smaller as if moving me nearer to him. I had a queer feeling. Once or twice I met his eyes. They were small, dark eyes. I moved slowly away and went out on a little point behind him and saw his wide antlers against the evening light. They seemed immense. He turned, lowered his head and bent toward me. For a suspended minute we looked into each other's eyes. I noticed that they were not dark now. They were red, and seemed to burn brighter as he stared. I whispered, "Bill, we had better go." And we did. We never saw him again.

Most people consider camera hunting a tender-foot's sport, safe and full of mild thrills, no hair-raising escapes of the big game hunter out to bag a glorified trophy. The only disasters in picture hunting that could possibly happen would come when the films were developed. It is admitted these are sometimes agonizing enough.

Aside from being well grounded in the technicalities of photography and supplied with a bag of complex equipment, there is something else just as important. That is a post graduate course in natural history and animal behavior, including your own. There is one very ticklish thing, and that is looking eye into eye. It becomes discovery for both you and him. It is too intimate an uncovering. You will see his pupils dilate, grow dark, the hair on his head begin to rise, the innocent curiosity on his face change slowly

to a Joe Lewis scowl, and his body take on a taut readiness. The bell is going to toll. Don't bolt. Be nonchalant, while you look for a tree.

I recall our first meeting with a Kodiak bear, said to be one of the most brutal killers. We considered it dangerous to carry a gun, dangerous for ourselves, so we never have. We were stalking caribou on Unimak Island, one of the Aleutian Chain. These islands are carpeted with typical tundra, tough, dwarfed willows and other wiry shrubs, which in the summer are matted with purple violets, bluebells, waxy orchids, and various wild flowers. They all make a spring bed to sleep on, but it is hard to travel over it. We used our own two feet for locomotion and our backs for a pack horse. A herd of caribou had been sighted with field-glasses before we left camp. After covering about six miles, going mostly on hands and knees, dodging behind grassy hummocks, we saw the sun light up their tawny coats. We knew that if they got our wind, they would take to their heels and be out of sight.

We were working down a ridge to a cut-bank that dropped off to a little lake near where the caribou were grazing, when we spied a big brown bear directly opposite us on another ridge that sloped down from volcanic Shishaldin, that snow-capped peak with a candle at its tip at night. He was busy digging out a squirrel and the dirt flew out in big scoops behind him. He was too absorbed in his job to imagine a human being on his lonely island. The squirrel out-foxed him or the burrow was empty, for he soon ambled on down his trail to the lake where he was accustomed to drink. Crawling flat, we shuffled down our ridge, too. The two trails met at the bottom.

He got there before we did and was leaning over drinking. Bill slid over the bank and set up the camera, not fifty yards behind the oblivious bruin. He was ready to shoot. Some little noise reached the bear. He lurched up, whirled about, his long arms hanging limp at his sides, his face a hideous visage, mouth wide, great broken teeth showing. Then he started straight up the path toward us.

Looking around, I didn't see even a hole to crawl into. I heard the camera buzzing and couldn't take my eyes off that big figure rolling up

the hill upon us. I almost thought out loud, "Stand still and make no noise." It was all over in a minute, the shapeless fur thing swishing past so fast he was only a blur. He was more scared than I was. Bill only grunted, "I forgot to open the shutter."

We were on our way again still searching for the big moose, up at dawn stalking the trails, back to any wayside cabin at night. The weather was playing tricks. It was superlatively bad for a week at a stretch. The blue-black clouds rumbled, thunder crashed and knife-blades of lightening crackled and cut across the sky -- and subsided as suddenly with a painted rainbow against the wet green hills. The sun broke through to lie soft and mellow, glinting the raindrops to iridescence on grass and leaves.

One day when we were in the Park and speeding across Fishing Bridge that cuts in two a long, wet willow marsh, we saw two moose, a young bull and a cow, come thrashing up the steep bank and cross the road into the lodge-pole timber. Once the bull looked back at the meadow, ears pricked up, eyes scared. We turned off hastily, grabbed our packs, and were after them. Bill took one path and I another. A sound of chopping was heard ahead of us, and we came upon a wood cutter. He had neither heard nor seen the moose.

From here we followed a single trail and had given up finding them. I happened to glance off in the trees, and there not fifty feet away were the two black ghosts. Their long heads and the bull's horns were lost in the branches, and their black legs lined up with the tree trunks. It was perfect obscurity. They knew it.

We agreed to separate and go around them, slowly urging them toward the lakeshore where it would be lighter. But they had different ideas. The minute they knew they were discovered, the bull broke into a dead run, slanting off in the wrong direction. Bill took after him as fast as he could follow, but he didn't have long legs to lope over logs. They disappeared from sight.

I was left alone. The cow still stood frozen under the trees, head up and eyes alert. I could see nothing to cause such excitement, unless it was the approaching rutting season when all the wild folk are stirred up. She seemed undecided what to do. She wasn't paying any attention to me, I thought. Walking slowly, I started to circle above her, moving in plain sight through the fairly open timber. She was about thirty feet away. All at once she turned slowly and faced me. I stopped, surprised at her attitude and the way she was looking at me. As we stared, something was dawning upon me. I knew that the mind of a moose once made up, could not be changed.

The cow moose, even with a calf, had always been gentle and I had never been afraid of her in all our picture escapades. But this had been done mostly in Willow Park where all the animals endure noisy serenades by the tourists.

Her eyes seemed to bore into me. Thoughts came fast and past meetings, pictures in my mind -- wading out into the deep, watery marsh -- fording the river -- pushing into the willows -- stepping plop into an old beaver run where the moose lie low and hidden -- pushing the branches aside to find a black hulk lying before me -- urging him up and out for the waiting camera man -- and that time when we were shooting a mother moose and calf almost in their faces near the road -- a brown bear ambling down unmindful -- the cow lifting her head and big ears -- stepping around us and the cameras -- lunging at the old bear, chasing him up a tree -- coming back to her calf -- finishing the pictures -- and -- and ----

I stood rooted gazing at the cow that now almost towered above me, for she was coming fast. The trees seemed to shrink away and grow transparent, too slim for shelter. She was going to lift a foot and cut me to pieces. But I couldn't move. I heard a piercing cry somewhere, but I didn't know that it was I who made it. There was the thud of hoofs on the needled floor and a chilly swishing. She had gone. I heard myself saying, "I knew she wouldn't do it to me."

During the summer months, the bull moose is a meek lamb in an uncouth body, over-built on the front and ludicrously cut short on the rear. Grotesque is the long, heavy head topped with spreading, palmated antlers, a big swollen nose, pendulous bell on the neck, and small black eyes. He seems all out of proportion and sensitive about his shape and his some twelve hundred pounds of flesh. He could never compete in a beauty or symmetry contest. Never-the-less, he is anything but a clumsy goof, for he threads the willows adroitly and silently, lies flat down in the river like a water baby, and generally lives and lets live.

But he has a dual character, one as foreign to the other as snow is to fire. In the mating season in the fall, he is belligerent and boisterous, plowing through the woods and streams like a tank on the warpath, bellowing a vibrant challenge to his competitors for a mate. If answering the urgent bleating of a cow, he gives a deep grunt, and almost breaks the house down to get to her. The spell is upon him for a few short weeks, during which time he has been known to charge men, striking slashing blows with his front feet as well as with his horns.

In his nomenclature, the moose is all mixed up. He is a moose of a fellow, but not a moose at all, for he is the largest of the American deer, and a cousin of the elk of northern Europe and Siberia. The bull moose of the Kenai Peninsula and adjoining regions in Alaska is the largest of his kind in the world, the Shiras moose of the Yellowstone region being somewhat smaller.

It had rained and thundered all night. We got up early as usual to search for two bull moose that we had sighted late the previous afternoon. One of them was a big one. Followed an old trail that wound through the woods and headed steeply for the bottom of a dark canyon. As we descended into the green gloom, our eyes were on the watch for two lumbering figures that might be feeding in the fresh-wet grass, or standing motionless in a clump of trees.

But no luck. They had moved down to the bottom and gone off around the hill. It would be quicker to climb back to the road and intercept them at

the other end of the valley. Stopped at a lonely ranger's station and were told, "Yes, they're right across the road in that clump of willows." We looked and saw nothing but some dry, silvery stubs sticking out of seared meadow grass. They were too pinched and decrepit to hide a coyote.

Climbing a little rise, we looked down on the willows, which were as silent as a cemetery, and as empty. Then I saw them --- big horns mingling with the streaked, gray brush. They were lying down, sunk deep in the grass. Both big heads were turned up to us. They were not forty feet off the highway, and no one would have suspected their hiding place.

Bill staid out of sight and got the cameras ready, while I, flat on my stomach, kept watch over the rim of the hill. Finally the big bull lifted himself heavily and without a sound or touching a twig, began to pull off a willow leaf here and there. Gradually he turned and still pretended to nibble, edged off and was soon making his way with slow steps into the depths of the grass. The other bull got up liesurely and followed him.

Then began the long stalk. Bill started out first, plodding, plodding behind his quarry, noiselessly but always there. Their long legs and big steps gained on him. They lay down, not inviting him, just expecting him. After a while it became a game. They moved further and further away, and at each stop they knew he would be coming along. As he came up to them, flattened out with eyes looking over the grass, he poked the camera closer until a big face filled the lens. It grew cloudy and no light for kodachromes. But as surely as the clock goes around, he couldn't have stopped shooting. The spell was on both pursuer and pursued. It was going on three hours since he took the trail.

I had shouldered my pack and started after them, but had been left away behind. They were almost out of sight in the deep meadow grass and approaching a shallow draw with more dead willows. There must have been some sub-moisture there for it looked a little green and moosey. I kept on the slightly higher ground in the open. But I had under-estimated the height and toughness of that dry grass. It twined around my legs and hobbled my feet, till

my pace was like a persistent snail. I was soon panting, and I was marooned in a sea of grass and had lost sight of everybody.

Here and there I came to large, round, hollowed out places, moose beds. There would be two or three rather close together. I began to feel the silence and aloneness. What if I should run smack onto a big bull in bed? Just beyond a batch of beds that seemed to be a communal resting place, I spied the top rail of a fence. I stretched up and saw a small, stoutly built corral. The heavy gate was closed. Pushing my way through a higher growth of grass, I dropped my pack to the ground and hastily began to climb the big logs that made its side. There were strands of barbed-wire strung thickly about it also, and at one corner a taller log stuck up in the air. It had steps to climb -- and up I went. Up there I drew a long breath and looked around.

The whole yellow meadow stretched all around. There wasn't a living thing in sight. Where could they be that I couldn't see them from this look-out? I lifted the field-glasses that hung around my neck and worked them slowly over the expanse. They picked up a gleam of something light colored, a khaki shirt among the brush. Then it was gone.

What could Bill be doing? I found out quickly, so suddenly that I almost fell off my perch. Bill's light shirt was flickering about too rapidly for photography. Then I saw it all plainly. The bigger moose was swinging his great horns at a rapid pace across a dry, open spot, and Bill was just one jump ahead of him, sprinting for the shelter of a thin clump of willows, like a rabbit running for cover. He made it, but the bull followed him right up around the bushes. And I thought that was going to be the end of Bill.

I expected to see the big beast dash right in and trample and slash everything to a pulp. I hoped to see Bill make a run for another bush and keep on dodging. But no, he sat tight. He was counting on a last trick. It worked. The peeved monster stood pawing the earth and swinging his horns

After bombarding the
bush and thrashing about
for some time, the old bull
meandered off across the meadow.

threateningly at the bush, but he was careful not to let those horns, still
in the last stages of velvet, so much as brush a limb. A couple of weeks later
when ^{his horns} they would be hard and smooth, Bill would have had no chance to say his
prayers, unless at his funeral. As it was, he had tested the old bull too
long and too close to the deadline. Later all Bill said was, "I ran faster
than the bull."