



ALASKA MOOSE ON YOUR OWN

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MEET THE GREATEST DIY
CHALLENGE OF THE LAST FRONTIER.

A GRUNT drifted down the canyon—a grunt so prehistorically deep it sent chills scampering down my spine. And then another. Within the vast thicket of stunted Arctic pine spilling from the canyon and flowing across the basin, a bull was awake—and he was coming.

The grunts paused, and I envisioned

the bull standing silent in the marshy bottoms, head erect, ponderous nose searching as he listened. Gripping the caribou shoulder blade I'd scavenged several days before, I scraped enthusiastically at a small pine. It clacked against the trunk like an adolescent antler and echoed hollowly off bristling needles.

CAN YOU DO IT?

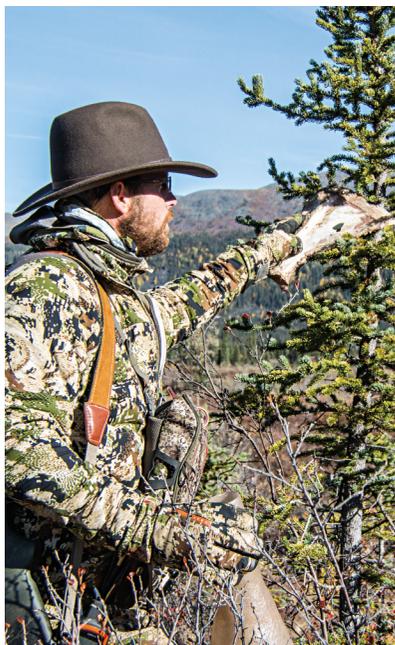
Before committing to an unguided moose hunt, you've got to set desire, emotion, and bravado aside and ask yourself a very candid question. Are you up to it?

Are you healthy enough and possess the physical strength to carry 50- to 160-pound packs over miles of horribly uneven, wet, marshy muskeg tundra? And to make multiple trips in a day to haul all the meat, hide, and horn of your trophy back to camp?

Do you have the desire to camp for 10 days in a vast wilderness, in a harsh environment without creature comforts, and to hunt persistently in an area you don't know well in which you are seeing little game? Hunting hard through rain, cold, and solitude while on short rations isn't easy. The reward of success is tremendous, but getting there can be miserable.

SURVIVING ALASKA TIP

Mental toughness is even more important than fitness.



“URUNGH.”

DROPPING the bone, I eased into a sitting position on a muskeg hummock. I braced my elbows on my knees and trained the crosshairs in my scope on a place where the sweeping pine grove thinned. Quietly, I racked a .375 H&H cartridge into the chamber of my Rifles Inc. custom Model 70 Winchester.

Antlers floated above the eight-foot pines. They were wide, unbelievably massive, and pale like the moon on a dark night. But I couldn't see the bull's body at all. I followed the rack with my scope, my peripheral vision scanning ahead of the walking bull for an opening in the pines. Three years of research, planning, and effort were coming together.

PLANNING & SCHEDULING

Self-planning a moose hunt is both rewarding and overwhelming. Where and when to hunt, how to get there, how to hunt, and how to transport meat, cape, and antlers home are all questions that must be answered and planned for.

Start by researching areas. If you can't carry a 140-pound moose hind-quarter out whole, you must limit yourself to areas that allow you to bone meat. A call to Alaska's Department of Fish and Game can help pinpoint likely units. Also, research moose population densities, hunter success rates, and trophy genetics.

Many areas have antler restrictions requiring a legal bull to have either a 50-inch spread or a certain number of brow tines on at least one side. If you want meat and maximum potential for success, avoid antler-restricted areas. If you want a trophy bull, restrictions aren't an issue.

Next, research outfitters and air taxi services. Outfitters sometimes offer a fully supplied camp with tent, sleeping

bags, food, and all the essentials, simplifying the gear list and transportation logistics. However, I prefer bringing my own gear, and I sometimes prefer air taxis to outfitters.

Taxi services either drop you off wherever you specify—putting the burden of choosing a good hunting spot on you—or in an area where they've seen good game. Outfitters usually put their guided hunters in their best spots, so you get second—or eighth or ninth—best.

Bulls become callable in early September. Later is better. The rut really kicks in as September rolls into October, but most seasons close between the 15th and the 25th of September. Book well in advance because the later hunt dates fill up early.

Once you've got a bull killed, field processed, and packed to the bush strip, contact your pilot. Weather depending, he will come get the meat, when it's safe to fly in, and put it in cold storage. If hunting with a partner, you can then focus on getting a second bull without your meat spoiling.

Schedule at least two free days after hunting and before flying home. This provides time to care for meat and to package antlers for checking onto your plane home. Fly Alaska Air. The airline's policy allows you to check properly packed antlered skulls as luggage.

Book a flexible ticket, in case you get weathered in and your pilot can't pick you up on schedule. Be understanding. If he refuses to fly, it's because he doesn't want to die, and he doesn't want you to die, either. Respect that.

To get your meat home, pack it in insulated boxes, flash freeze it, and check it on your flight as excess baggage. Alternately, schedule a refrigerated transport truck, such as Alaska Express Trucking. The latter is less expensive. However, you're obliged to meet the truck at the drop-off point nearest your hometown. Sometimes that's a day's drive away.

SURVIVING ALASKA TIP

Purchase a Garmin inReach device. It serves as a GPS, weather station, and satellite texting device with which to contact your pilot and your loved ones at home.



When you've got an animal on the ground, contact your pilot. Be prepared—weather may prevent him from coming right away.



layers, and other miscellaneous gear must also go in your pack.

Many pilots allow you to wear some heavy gear on board. This isn't cheating; it's to keep the weight forward in the plane. Most bush planes are taildraggers, and too much weight in the tail makes the craft susceptible to skewing sideways when landing. Wear your ammo pouch, hunting knife, binocular, and camera. Stick paperback books, batteries, GPS, headlamp, and other loose ends in your pockets.

FITNESS PREP

If you're overweight, get down to healthy doctor-recommended levels. Otherwise you're asking for disaster. Before last fall's moose hunt, I dropped 26 pounds using the ketogenic diet. As a result, I was able to hunt harder and pack more weight farther.

Don't just drop weight. Get fit. While strength is important, muscle mass is less critical than muscle tone. In addition to shouldering a 150-pound pack, every effort will be a long, sustained one. Train for endurance.

UNDER THE LEGAL LIMIT

Most bush pilots limit drop-off hunters to a maximum of 50 to 55 pounds, not counting rifle and items worn on the person. Whittling gear and food down to that weight can seem impossible.

Purchase the best ultralight mountaineering-quality gear you can find. A JetBoil stove, fuel canisters, and tent can be shared between you and your hunting partner. Your sleeping bag should be rated to zero degrees or lower. I use a Mountain Hardwear Wraith rated to minus-30 degrees and insulated with down treated to be water resistant. Quality of rest is critical to hunting hard, so include a sleeping pad.

Calculate how many freeze-dried meals you'll need for your time in the backcountry and pack accordingly. Add vitamin supplements and energy powders to give you an extra boost. Include a container of Montreal Steak Rub. (Nothing tastes as good as fresh moose flame-broiled over a campfire.)

A water-filtration system, basic emergency supplies, heavy coat, extra base

SURVIVING ALASKA TIP

Carry a LifeStraw personal water-filtration device in a pocket when hunting or flying.

SURVIVING ALASKA TIP

Tune up muscles and joints by carrying 50 pounds of rock salt in your backpack for two miles every day for a month prior to your hunt.



TO KILL A MOOSE

You can't afford to have your rifle go down during a 10-day fly-in wilderness hunt. (Ask me how I know.) Prioritize reliability. Because moose country is bear country, I prefer controlled-round-feed actions, such as Winchester's Model 70, Kimber's Model 8400, and classic Mauser-based designs. Pick a rifle that feels good, that you shoot well, and that is not too heavy.

Moose are not hard to kill. They are huge with slow nervous systems, so they don't die quickly, but they die easily enough. Assuming you put a quality bullet in the sweet spot, your favorite deer cartridge will do the job.

However, occasionally a grizzly bear initiates an argument over whose dinner that dead bull actually is. If he has plans to add you as an appetizer, it behooves you to have a rifle capable of stopping him.

I prefer nothing less than a .30-caliber magnum and believe that really good moose/bear country cartridges begin with the various .338 magnums. Given my druthers, I pack a .375 H&H.

The projectile you fire is far more important than the actual cartridge. Pick a tough, controlled-expansion design that will smash through heavy bone and still penetrate deeply. Great options are Hornady's GMX and DGX Bonded; Barnes's TSX, TTSX, and LRX; Nosler's Partition; Federal's TBT and EDGE TLR; and Swift's A-Frame.

Moose hunts abuse optics. Top your rifle with the best scope you can and carry the best binocular you can buy. I like modest magnification in a scope, because so many bulls are shot at rock-throwing distance. Plan to spend at least \$400 each for your riflescope and bino.

SURVIVING ALASKA TIP

A good spotting scope can help you judge trophy quality at a distance, saving you miles and effort in stalking subpar bulls. My go-to is a Leupold 12-40X Gold Ring on a carbon-fiber tripod.

Don't skimp on optics for hunting Alaska—you need exceptional glass. And carry enough stopping power to bring down a moose or hungry grizz.



MAKING MOOSE MEAT

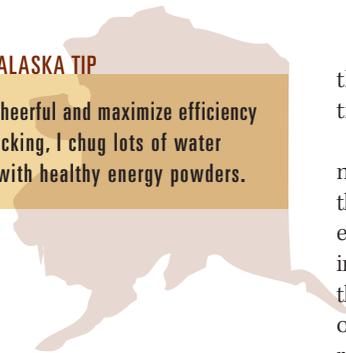
Cutting up a bull moose—particularly in thick brush or in water—is not the place to learn field-dressing skills. If you can't capably remove quarters, backstraps and loins, ribs, neck meat, and desirable organs, become adept before going. There is no more challenging meat-care effort than reducing a 1,500-pound bull into clean, manageable meat sacks.

This is critical: Get a very good freighter-type backpack. Do not rely on a modular expandable-type pack or a five-day mountaineering pack. You need an expedition-grade pack with freighter-quality frame, suspension, and hip belt.

A universal Alaskan favorite is the Frontier Gear of Alaska Freighter frame with the Hunter Pack. If you insist on an internal-frame pack, shop for expedition-size bags with massive capacity (7,000 cubic inches or more), robust zippers, straps, and buckles.

SURVIVING ALASKA TIP

To stay cheerful and maximize efficiency while packing, I chug lots of water infused with healthy energy powders.



THE LINGERING TASTE

Ghostly white in my scope, the gigantic bull's antlers traced his progress through the thicket like a periscope through glassy sea. A patch of massive shoulder showed briefly, the crosshair found its place, and that lovely custom .375 H&H sent a Hornady bullet squarely through both lungs.

Staggering, antlers swaying, the old bull fought to keep his feet, knowing in some deep, primordial way that if he fell, he died. Rearing until he towered above the crippled alder, he crashed to

the ground, driving his ivory-polished tines deep into the tundra.

Alaska is spectacular, and a big bull moose is awesome in the truest sense of the word. That coupled with the incredible effort you'll put in writes deep memories into your soul. Months after returning to the hustle, bustle, and convenient comforts of home, you'll lie awake at night and remember frost on blueberries and the suction of the muskeg at your boots. You'll recall the scorched-seasoning smell of succulent backstrap in the flames as you wearily and jubilantly cut up your bull by firelight.

Once home, you'll jealously guard that meat, sure in some inner chamber of your soul that nobody but you can appreciate its real worth. And before supplies run thin, and your finances recover, you'll begin planning again. Because Alaska, once she has torn apart your body, challenged your mind, and replenished your soul, is an addiction you'll never kick. 🍷

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