

Moose (*Alces alces shirasi*) are the largest members of the deer family in Yellowstone. A male (bull) moose can weigh nearly 1,000 pounds and stand more than seven feet at the shoulder. Both sexes have long legs that enable them to wade into rivers and through deep snow, to swim, and to run fast. Despite its size, a moose can slip through the woods without a sound. Moose, especially cows with calves, are unpredictable and have chased people in the park.

Both sexes are dark brown, often with tan legs and muzzle. Bulls can be distinguished from cows by their antlers. Adults of both sexes have “bells”—a pendulous dewlap of skin and hair that dangles from the throat and has no known function.

In summer, moose eat aquatic plants like water lilies, duckweed, and burweed. But the principle staples of the moose diet are the leaves and twigs of the willow, followed by other woody browse species such as gooseberry and buffaloberry. An adult moose consumes approximately 10–12 pounds of food per day in the winter and approximately 22–26 pounds of food per day in the summer.

Some moose that summer in the park migrate in winter to lower elevations west and south of Yellowstone where willow remains exposed above the snow. But many moose move to higher elevations (as high as 8,500 feet) to winter in mature stands of

As of January 2011 . . .

Number in Yellowstone

- Less than 200.
- Population has declined in last 40 years due to a number of factors such as loss of old growth forests surrounding the park, hunting outside the park, burning of winter habitat (spruce-fir forests) in 1988, and predators.

Where to see

Marshy areas of meadows, lake shores, and along rivers.

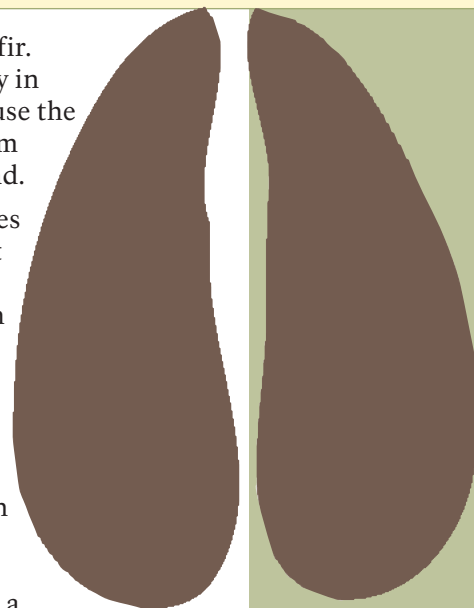
Behavior & Size

- Largest member of deer family.
- Adult male (bull) weighs close to 1,000 pounds; female (cow) weighs up to 900 pounds; 5½ to 7½ feet at the shoulder.
- Browses on willows and aquatic plants in summer; willows where available in winter or on conifers as high as 8,500 feet.
- Usually alone or in small family groups.
- Mating season peaks in late September and early October; one or two calves born in late May or June.
- Lives up to 20 years.

subalpine fir and Douglas-fir. Moose can also move easily in these thick fir stands because the branches prevent snow from accumulating on the ground.

Moose are solitary creatures for most of the year, except during the mating season or rut. During the rut, both bulls and cows are vocal: the cows may be heard grunting in search of a mate, and bulls challenge one another with low croaks before clashing with their antlers. A bull on the offensive tries to knock its opponent sideways. If such a move is successful, the challenger follows through with another thrust of its antlers. The weaker animal usually gives up before any serious damage is done; occasionally the opponent’s antlers inflict a mortal wound.

Bulls usually shed their antlers in late November or December, although young bulls may retain their antlers as late as



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Moose



March. Shedding their heavy antlers helps them conserve energy and promotes easier winter survival. In April or May, bulls begin to grow new antlers. Small bumps on each side of the forehead start to swell, then enlarge until they are knobs covered with a black fuzz (called velvet) and fed by blood that flows through a network of veins. Finally the knobs change into antlers and grow until August. The antlers are flat and palmate (shaped like a hand). Yearlings grow six to eight inch spikes; prime adult bulls usually grow the largest antlers—as wide as five feet from tip to tip. Then the bull rubs and polishes his antlers on small trees in preparation for the rut.

Cows are pregnant through the winter; gestation is approximately eight months. When ready to give birth, the cow drives off any previous year's offspring that may have wintered with her and seeks out a thicket. She gives birth to one or more calves, each weighing 25–35 pounds.

A calf walks a few hours after birth and stays close to its mother. Even so, a moose calf often becomes prey for bears or wolves and less frequently for cougars or coyotes.

History

Moose were reportedly very rare in north-west Wyoming when the park was established in 1872. Subsequent protection from hunting and wolf control programs may have contributed to increased numbers. However, forest fire suppression probably was the most important factor in their population increase because moose depend on mature fir forests for winter survival. By the 1970s, an estimated 1,000 moose inhabited the park.

The moose population declined following the fires of 1988. Many old moose died during the winter of 1988–89, probably as a combined result of the loss of good moose forage and a harsh winter. Unlike moose habitat elsewhere, northern Yellowstone does not have woody browse species that will come in quickly after a fire and extend above the snowpack to provide winter food. Therefore, the overall effect of the fires was probably detrimental to moose populations. Their current population and distribution are unknown.

Today, moose are most likely seen in the park's southwestern corner and in the Soda Butte Creek, Pelican Creek, Lewis River, and Gallatin River drainages.