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ARCTIC ALASKA

A photograph of a large moose with impressive, velvet-covered antlers. The moose is standing in a field of tall, thin stalks with small orange flowers. A green evergreen tree is visible on the left side of the frame. The background is a soft-focus landscape of trees and foliage.

No Place for Moose or Man!

BY JOHN WOOTTERS

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The Alaskan Arctic is a harsh and unforgiving land, demanding a very high price of those who would take her magnificent big-game animals in fair chase. All this has been said before, but it bears repeating as illumination for the tale I am about to tell.

Five of us, mostly members of that group of blackpowder hunters jocularly known as the Deep East Texas Bear Hunters Association, decided to “go for the big one” with our muzzleloading rifles; we booked a hunt for Alaska moose, afoot and unguided on the south slope of the Brooks mountain range.

As a group, it’s only fair to say that we bit off a mite more than we could chew.

It wasn’t the rifles. Nobody with a sense of history could doubt that .54-caliber, Hawken-style frontstuffers can put “paid in full” to a 1,200-pound bull moose; that was proved nearly 200 years ago.

And it certainly wasn’t the outfitter. Paul Mooney agreed to furnish us with basic camps in known game country, with a wrangler-cook to help with the chores and in getting trophies and meat properly taken care of, and with pack animals to transport gear and game. For these services, he charged \$1,700 per man, something like one-third the going rate for a guided, mounted, 14-day hunt in the same country for the same species. The actual hunting was to be up to us, along with caping, butchering and boning the various beasts we assumed would be dropping like flies before our muzzles. Paul delivered on everything over which he had any control—but a couple of items proved to be beyond his or anyone else’s influence.

Our theater of operations was to be the Crow’s Nest Creek drainage, about 30 miles northwest of Arctic Village, some 125 miles north of the Arctic Circle. A careful study of the topo maps sounded no warning bells in my cranium. The country is not particularly high (averaging perhaps 3,000 feet above sea level) or particularly steep. It alerted me to the likelihood of muskeg in the bottoms, but I figured that if horses and mules, with their small hooves and great weight, could make it, it wouldn’t be impossibly tough for me, even though I’m in my fifties and not in the physical condition I used to enjoy. What the maps didn’t show was the muskeg and tussocks everywhere—on steep slopes, on flat ground, even in the high mountain passes.

Those who have hunted in the Far North are, by now, nodding their heads sympathetically and making chuckling sounds. Those who haven’t cannot conceive of what I’m talking about. Muskeg can be thought of as the eighth plague visited upon man for his sins, ranking somewhere between the locusts and the boils. It consists of hummocks of moss, lichens and a little grass, up to the size of a volleyball and similarly shaped, separated by spaces of uncertain depth and occupied by anything from half-frozen muddy slush to jagged rocks. You can rarely step from one tussock to the next. You step up on one and then down into the muck between it, then up onto the next one, and so on. And you never know how far down your foot will go; it may be to your crotch on one step; on the next, your heel may bottom with a spine-jarring crunch only 6 inches below the “surface.” You flounder and struggle and sweat and curse under the weight of rifle and pack and, sooner or later, take



Packstrings were used to transport meat and gear, but their efficiency in the Arctic is questionable—few animals survived.

a header into the mire. Speaking only for myself, I’d rather walk 100 yards barefoot over hot coals than 100 yards in muskeg, and there’s not a game animal on the face of the earth that I want badly enough to navigate a mile of really bad muskeg. Maybe 20 years ago, but I’m old enough to know better now.

The above description—believe me, it’s an understatement and phrased in the mildest of terms—will explain why my companions and I found the terrain limited our hunting radius, afoot, rather severely. On reasonable footing and at low elevations, I’d consider myself capable of carrying light pack and rifle at least 5 to 7 miles and of returning to camp on the same day. On Crow’s Nest Creek, I came to regard my radius as maybe a mile-and-a-half or two, outside. And even that left me utterly spent, almost too tired to eat dinner.

All of which brings up another problem. The Arctic has a short growing season—a 5-inch spruce log lying around camp as firewood showed its age, by ring count, as 192 years!—and simply cannot support much biomass. I don’t know how many thousands of acres are required for each large grazing animal, but I do know that if you happen not to be in the right place at the right time you can glass a hell of a lot of country and see nothing. Which, in turn, means that the lack of mobility mentioned above can destroy a man’s chances of getting any kind of game, putting aside all thoughts of looking over a number of heads in search of a trophy-class specimen.

On the other hand, if you are in the right place at the right time—if you happen to catch the caribou migration, for example—you may see hundreds of fine animals in a single vista. For us, that was not to be. The weather was mild and the caribou simply didn’t come. For me, neither did the moose, nor any other mammal larger than a ground squirrel.

For Dunlop Farren and his father, Paul, things went better, as we shall see. They hunted from a spike camp a couple of miles from base, overlooking a secondary drainage, and saw half a dozen or so moose, including one monster bull, one very good one and a couple of mulligans. Dunlop, the youngest and strongest member of the party, lost the monster on a wind change while stalking within muzzleloader

range—or what he thought was muzzleloader range. A couple of days later, he successfully stalked within 60 yards of a pair of bulls as they rested in a willow thicket. When they rose, he fired at the larger with his .54-caliber handmade Hawken, and both bulls ran. Dunlop ran after them, reloading as he went, and when he saw the pair again, breaking out of the willows on the hillside at a little less than 200 yards, one animal was falling behind, his head lowered. Thinking he was shooting at a wounded animal, Dunlop led the trotting beast, calculating trajectories, and fired again. The 410-grain Maxi-Ball took the bull behind the shoulder, ripped up the vitals in the chest and came to rest under the hide on the far side.

The moose went down almost in his tracks, all four legs stiff, and turned out to be the smaller bull of the pair, with a 47-inch spread. The next day, Farren followed the running tracks of the other bull about four miles and concluded that his first ball had deflected from some dead tree branches and, at worst, punched a hole in the antlers.

The distance of his successful shot actually measured 190 yards, a range at which he would never have fired unless convinced he was firing at an animal that was escaping wounded. As he said later, if he'd known then what he knew after that shot about the performance of the .54 at long range, he'd have collected that monster he'd passed up a few days earlier.

Actually, the larger bull of Dunlop's pair happened to run right by Paul Farren, who was watching from a nearby hill-top, and whose unfamiliarity with the muzzleloading rifle cost him what he described as an easy shot. That moose came to be known as the "enchanted bull," and he's still there in Crow's Nest—and, as far as I'm concerned, you can have him if you can get him!

Dunlop's was not to be the only bull moose taken by the Bear Hunters, however. The other one committed suicide, more or less.

On the day we were supposed to rendezvous with a float plane to return to Fort Yukon (we'd started calling it the "Day of Deliverance"), Francis Winters and Jack Clauder were riding from camp to Portage Lake with the wranglers and a couple of pack mules. In a creek bottom en route, one of the packs began to slip, and the wrangler, a husky and cheerful 22-year-old named Joe Letarte, called a halt to adjust it. As the packstring stood there in the snow, a bull moose grunted 200 or 300 yards out in the willow flat along the creek. The wrangler instantly replied, but nothing more was heard until the party had moved on another quarter mile. Then the bull grunted again, closer, and this time responded to answering calls. Shortly, his antlers appeared over the willow tops.

Now, it will be remembered that this party was traveling, not hunting, and Francis Winters' Allen Fire Arms Co. Santa Fe Hawken, although loaded, was cased and packed on one of the mules. When the bull actually appeared, things got a little lively around the pack string, with Joe trying to get Winters' smokepole uncased, Winters trying to find his capper, all the humans trying to look like a cow moose and the mules trying very hard *not* to look like a cow moose. Joe got the rifle to Francis but without the ramrod. Francis dropped his capper in the snow, retrieved it, and found the first three percussion caps he thumbed out packed with snow. So was the fourth, but the moose was now only about 75 yards away, in full view, and still coming, so Francis blew the snow out of the cap and rammed it onto the nipple. Knowing that without a ramrod there would



One item that can't be doubted is the efficiency of the .54-caliber muzzleloaders on Alaskan moose. Left, Francis Winters' moose was called up and taken with an Allen Fire Arms Co. Hawken. Above, Dunlop Farren dropped his bull with one shot at 190 yards.

be no quick second shot, and without a live cap there wouldn't even be a first one, he advanced a few yards and knelt.

The bull now stopped and began to turn back toward the willows, and Winters held behind the massive shoulder, prayed and pulled. To his astonishment, the rifle fired perfectly, and by the time the smoke cloud drifted to one side, the moose was down and stone dead. The specially designed 385-grain Maxi-type bullet had broken a shoulder, wrecked the vitals and exited on the far side.

Later, the wranglers—both experienced hunters—would confess that they had had no idea that muzzleloading rifles could be as deadly on animals the size of Alaskan moose as this one proved to be. Although not particularly hard to dispatch, the moose is hard to put down quickly and keep down, and it seems impervious to shock. For just that reason, however, it can be argued that a 385-grain, .54-caliber slug at about 1,500 fps is possibly even more effective on this species than a high-velocity magnum.

Francis' bull was mature, but no candidate for the record book (51.5 inches, outside). Still, both the bulls collected on this trip—on foot, without guides, in the Brooks Range with muzzleloading rifles—qualify as trophies in the truest sense of the word.

We'd thought that was the last day of the trip, but we were wrong. Weather closed in over the lake, and the plane didn't

come. It didn't come the next day, either. On the third day, we heard the distant drone of a light plane engine and rejoiced, but our joy was short-lived; the aircraft, when it appeared, had wheels, not floats. It circled our impromptu camp on the shore of Portage Lake and dropped a message.

It was not exactly the best news I ever received. It said the float plane was out of commission mechanically, that the Arctic Circle Air Service had nine other hunters stranded in the wilderness (we made the backlog 14), that the weather prediction for tomorrow was bad, and that they hoped the lake wouldn't freeze.

We hoped not, too. The water temperature at that moment was 34 degrees, and there was no wind. If the surface froze solid, there was no way out except a helicopter. The way out on foot was 100 miles of muskeg with deep snow in the passes, and none of us thought we could make it, carrying only the barest necessities for survival in our packs. There was nothing to do but sit and wait. We were getting low on food, although we had plenty of moose meat and a lake full of fish (as long as our lures didn't bounce off the surface), and our supply of firewood was limited. The nearest timber in this barren land was so far away that the existing supply had been packed in on mule back—and we had no mules at that time. We did have shelter, plenty of warm clothing and sleeping bags and supplies for a few more days, so it was not exactly a survival situation ... yet. The note from the sky didn't tell us when the charter service hoped to fly us back to civilization.

So we took pictures, hunted a little, compared beards and formed the world's most exclusive sportsmen's society, the Portage Lake Rod and Gun Club. And listened a lot—for the sound of a plane's engine, for a north wind that might signal a weather change and move the cold, low-hanging clouds away, and, at night, for a grizzly that might discover the moose meat.

All of us carried .44 magnum revolvers in our armpits, hoping we wouldn't have to deal with an enraged bear, especially at night. It wasn't until we got to Fairbanks that we learned, according to an official survey by the Alaska Game and Fish Department, no man in Alaskan history has ever defended himself from an attacking grizzly with a handgun of any description and survived.

Even when the float plane finally appeared on the fifth day, our troubles were not over. On his second trip, with Dunlop and Francis aboard, the pilot discovered that one pontoon was sinking during takeoff, and barely made it back to shallow water. The party then hauled the plane far enough out of the water to reveal a gaping hole in the float, which they crudely patched with aluminum from cooking pans, epoxy glue and pieces of firewood as braces. Believe it or not, the patch held despite the 20-degree weather, and everybody was safely delivered to Fort Yukon, where a night landing was executed on the unlighted runway by means of gasoline smudge pots to mark the strip.

And I gotta tell ya, it was a joyous moment when all five of us were reunited in the Arctic Circle Air Service operations office in Fort Yukon that night—even if there was no place in town to sleep except the floor of that office and no place to get a square meal. It beat the hell out of the accommodations

of the Portage Lake Rod and Gun Club!

There are lessons to be learned from the Bear Hunters' invasion of the Arctic. One is that transportation—from mules to aircraft—is dicey, and travel schedules should be kept flexible, to say the least. Leave at least five or six days leeway in the schedule. Another is that Arctic hunting is mostly a young man's game, and then only for those truly motivated hunters who are in the finest possible physical condition.

It's hard country—hard on men, hard on stock and hard on equipment. Only the very finest gear will serve, and it must be carefully chosen in light of conditions. In the Arctic, a small mistake or a moment of carelessness or lack of foresight can be disastrous. What seems at the moment to be a minor inconvenience can turn into a life-or-death situation in the twinkling of an eye. It is different from any other hunting I've encountered in a lifetime of rambling all over the world, and tougher than any, too. Companions must be chosen with the same care as equipment, footgear and sleeping bags, because you can count on being placed under some stress on a trip like this. Fortunately, my companions were the salvation of us all, cheerful even under duress, supportive of each other, caring, sharing, and, yes, brave.

All in all, I would not recommend an unguided, unmounted hunt in the Arctic to anyone who doesn't know from experience what he's getting into. Our outfitter, Paul Mooney, although highly complimentary of our bunch, says that he'll book no more unguided, drop-camp-type hunts, and I don't blame him. If you want a first-class guided hunt with horses in the Brooks Range for grizzly, moose, caribou, Dall sheep, black bear, wolf, and wolverine, you couldn't do better than with Paul—if you're a young, very hardy and hard hunter.

And, if you think I've been exaggerating the Arctic, it may be worth a final note: After we left, Joe Letarte and the

other wrangler began the annual ride to get the horses and mules, gear, meat and capes out to the Alaska pipeline road. Enroute, they lost two more mules (that made five of the original eight horses and mules that failed to survive the season) and had to walk out, leaving both moose capes and a lot of Paul's equipment behind. They were four days overdue, and they barely made it.

To paraphrase Robert Service:

*The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold,
And the Northern lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see ...
Was probably the Portage Lake Rod and Gull Club
Dancing in the snow as the floatplane set down
Coming for to carry them to town!*

Sorry! ★

Mr. Wootters, a former HSC President, passed away in January of 2013. HSCF greatly appreciates his wife, Jeanne McRae Wootters, for sharing his legacy and wisdom. johnwootters.com

*This Land of the
Midnight Sun is not
always the hunting
heaven so many of us
dream about. We got
moose, all right. But
we also discovered
that sometimes you're
lucky just to survive.*