

Another Moose Meeting

Last month in this space I described my amicable April 19 encounter with a lonely adolescent moose. Recently banished from its mother's side, it was eager for companionship. I have since heard from other people who have enjoyed visits from such lonely yearling moose.

From that encounter, I spun a fantasy that this lonely moose would move to the vicinity of Surprise Pond, and I could spend the summer keeping the moose company and watching beavers. I looked for that little moose high and low on the evenings that followed. I often found tracks. Once I even saw the tracks of a young moose that had gone charging off into the woods at my approach. I decided my moose had grown accustomed to its independence and had no further use for strange bipeds.

When the bugs came out, I set up a tent on the far side of a beautiful little wet meadow by Surprise Pond, and spend the night there often so I can stay out for the late show. The three beavers continue to amuse, charm, and puzzle me. A few hooded mergansers whiz overhead most evenings and splash down for a paddle at dusk. Once there was the funny barred owl that perched on a snag nearby when I was singing and peered at me inscrutably. Best of all was the evening the little family of water shrews provided entertainment by scurrying across the surface of the water.

Last night, June 3, I arrived late, and found the meadow awash in the light of a gibbous moon. The pale ferns and low mist seemed to glow against the black backdrop of spruce and fir. A little moose stood in silhouette about fifty feet away. After ten minutes or so it wandered into the shadows in the direction of my tent. I hoped I'd still find it there after I visited with the beavers.

When I left the pond, a thin layer of clouds covered the moon and I couldn't see the moose. I zipped myself into the bug-free zone to enjoy the sounds of a June night. Peepers still peeped, though not with the enthusiasm they had a month ago. In the distance a saw-whet owl, the first I'd heard this year, tooted energetically. Some small



creature, light on its feet, tripped past the tent a number of times. On the hill near my tent a young moose masticated something tough with its ridged molars, rattled leafy branches as he browsed, shook his head, flapping his leathery ears, and cleared his nasal passages indelicately.

A noise woke me at dawn. There, in the dewy meadow, a homely little moose met my gaze from thirty feet away. If this was the same moose of seven weeks ago, he had changed. This moose, with antlers budding, was clearly a he and had made more progress toward a summer coat than the shaggy creature of April 19. Still, he seemed to think he knew me. He received my offering of pleasant-ries with an interested demeanor and then wandered off to browse nearby. I watched for a while, and eventually got up. It was a cold dawn, so I sat at the edge of the meadow wrapped in my sleeping bag taking notes and

making sketches.

After I settled myself the moose came over and stood nearby facing me, maintaining the comfort distance of thirty feet. He chewed his cud. Yellowthroats sang in the meadowsweet. When the mountain tilted eastward enough so the sun could shine into this little valley, it was warm enough for me to get up and find out what the moose and other meadow denizens had been up to. Moose and I wandered the meadow on our separate missions, but ever aware of the other's whereabouts, and gradually moving closer together. When we paused to acknowledge each other, the moose stretched out his long snout and nodded, and reached out my mosquito netted arm and nodded.

The breakthrough came after about forty minutes. By this point the comfort zone had diminished to fifteen feet, at least for brief periods. I was sitting on a tussock when the moose paused in his browsing, stuck out his great snout and took three tentative strides in my direction. I rose halfway and reach out my hand. We touched each other for just a moment, and if a moose's eyes can be filled with wonder, that is what I saw there.

I did have a few more things to do, so I gradually headed back to the tent to pack up. The moose sort of followed, and along the way we paused to

"touch noses" a couple more times. These times the moose could not contain his feelings (fear? delight? exhilaration?) and whirled and bounded away a few steps after each cautious tag.

The moose remained in the meadow while I went over to my tent. Once at my tent, a grouse came clucking toward me from the hillside, all puffed up to distract me from chicks. To my surprise, the little moose pinned its ears back, charged into the woods and chased the grouse away, not a bit impressed by her broken wing impression. I'll let you decide how to interpret that!

I was not in any hurry to hike back out to the world of keyboards and telephones and away from this world where creatures transcend the species barrier. I ambled slowly toward the homeward side of the meadow. So did the moose. I paused again to make some final notes (blackburnian warbler singing, moose eating cinnamon fern and bracken fern, ten feet away). As an "until we meet again," the moose strolled around in front of me and extended his nose. This time hand and nose came together and apart three times.

Guess whom I'm hoping to see next time I visit Surprise Pond?

—Patti Smith