

The View From Heifer Hill: May 2009

How to Meet a Moose

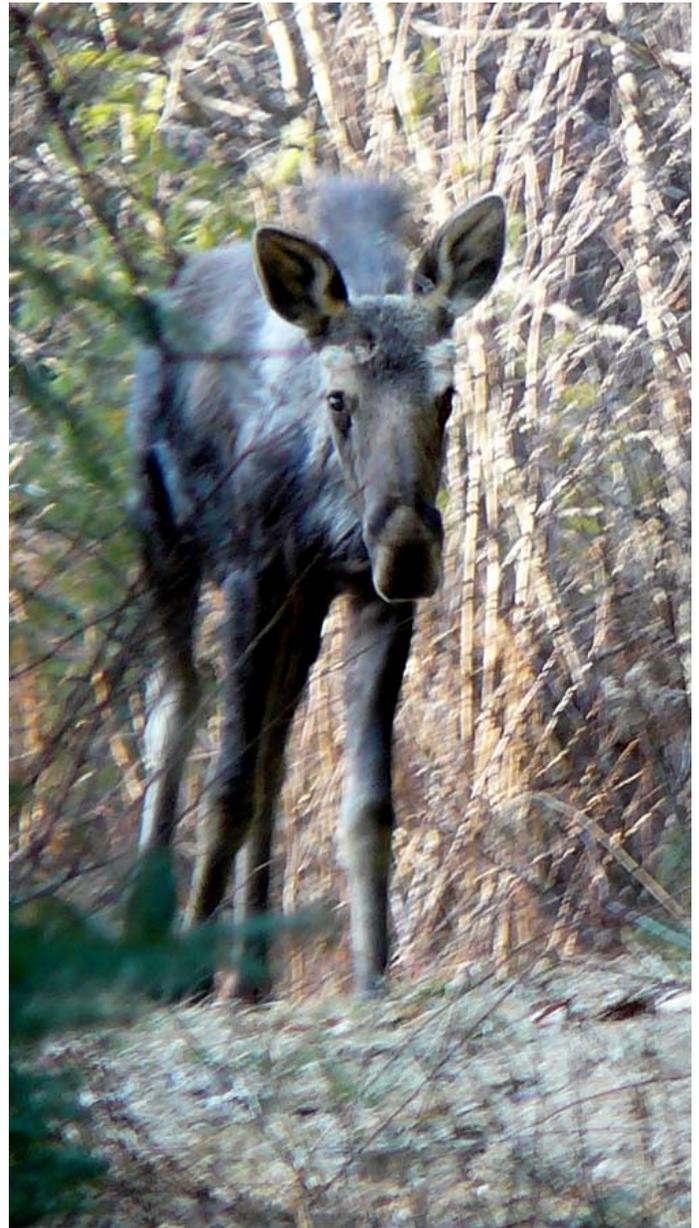
Last year I resolved to develop a relationship with a beaver, and over the course of about one hundred evenings, I came to know a small family of them, and they learned a bit about me, too. My experiences with the beavers proved so rewarding that I decided to try something more ambitious this year—I hoped to get to know a moose.

It wouldn't have occurred to me to entertain such a fancy except that I heard a report that there is a particular time of year when a particular sort of moose is eager for company of most any kind. The sort of moose in question is a yearling that has been in the constant company of its mother since birth. Mother moose are courageous and devoted. I'd far sooner come between a bear and its cubs than a moose and her calf. Their devotion is time sensitive, however, and it runs out just before the next calf is due to arrive. The gangly yearlings are driven off without mercy, and find themselves quite alone and lonesome. But what were my chances of being in the right place at the right moment to meet a forsaken young moose? Though I spend a fair bit of time in the woods, I seldom encounter moose. Stealth is usually not something I strive for, and moose, with their prodigious snouts and ears, have no trouble steering clear of me.

On April 19, as I strolled to my rendezvous with the beavers, however, a moose blocked the trail some fifty feet away, its head up and its giant ears swiveled in my direction. Could it be? Yes, it was clearly an adolescent moose. But was it the right time?

My strategy when I've been seen by a wild animal is to behave in a manner I hope it will interpret as non-threatening, and to speak in a voice I hope it will interpret as friendly. I try not to pay much attention to the creature itself, but busy myself with something intended to look like herbivory.

I put my strategy into action. The moose stood and stared. When I sat down to dig my camera out of my pack, it came a couple of steps closer and continued watching me. It turned and wandered down the trail several paces, but then came back again. This went on for about fifteen minutes before the moose strolled off into a thicket.



What to do? I didn't want to give the moose the impression I was pursuing it, but I didn't want to miss any opportunities for further interaction. I strolled in the direction it had headed, but some twenty feet farther up the trail. I suspected it had headed for the brook. Sure enough, the moose stood in the stream about forty feet from where I emerged from the woods. I sat down, said some friendly things, and looked around. Within a couple of minutes, the moose was chewing its cud and looking around, too, and occasionally looking back at me. When it did it would sometimes stretch its nose toward me and nod its head a bit.

I have spent much of my life in the company of horses and have learned that they are excellent and expressive communicators. This moose spoke to me in that same familiar language. Stretching out your neck and nod-

ding in horse talk means, “I’m interested in you and I’m thinking about coming over, but I’m not too sure.” I think the moose was saying the same thing with its stretching and nodding.

After twenty minutes or so, the moose wandered off again, and again I decided to follow. This time the moose stood belly deep in an old beaver pool, and it watched with no sign of alarm as I came out of the woods again. I stood on a bar matted with pale grasses, admired a shrub, scrutinized the woods, and talked to the moose. The moose behaved in much the same way, dipping its great nose in the water and splashing, sampling the sticks next to it, and looking over at me with an expression of relaxed curiosity. Finally it turned to face me and took a few steps toward me. Then to my disappointment, it remembered something else it had to do and turned and disappeared in the alders. The moose and I had spent an hour and a half together, and I like to think we shared a sense of camaraderie as we enjoyed the evening on the stream, and maybe for that time the moose felt a bit less lonely.

Spring has exploded at the beaver ponds. On April 23, I was thrilled to find one tiny wildflower in bloom, the golden saxifrage, among the grays and browns of the Marlboro woods. By April 26 the beaver’s world was green, with buds unfurling and shoots extending so fast I think I could have seen them grow if I had the patience. A pair of geese is contemplating nesting on the beaver lodge where Henry, the friendly gander, set up housekeeping with his mate last spring. This gander is not Henry, but the goose may be his former mate. She drags her reluctant beau over to where I sit and they climb onto logs nearby to preen and flap their wings. At dusk a few of the vocal virtuosos—winter wren, hermit thrush, and white-throated sparrows—have begun staking claims to parts of the pond shore. The three beavers have taken care of some spring chores and are now beginning to enjoy their seasons of ease and abundance. I hope that at least one young moose is beginning to do the same.