

Moose in Manitoba

BY JOHN TOONE

It was a sticky Saturday in September, with traffic snarled by the bitter and often bizarre rivalry between fanatics of the Winnipeg and Saskatchewan football clubs. The intoxicating atmosphere was building for the opening kickoff, when the Banjo Bowl moose made his unfortunate appearance near the stadium. Not openly supporting either team, this juvenile bull moose found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, adding to the spectacle.

Given this well-publicized encounter, it would not be a stretch for your average Winnipegger to think that moose are overabundant. Portrayed as being dangerous, and one may conclude that overpopulation is the cause for concern. To get some perspective,

consider this relatively short history of moose in Manitoba.

Moose originated in eastern Asia. Moose travelled across the land bridge that spanned the Bering Sea to arrive in what is now North America from the extreme north-west. When the big ice sheet broke in two about 14,000 years ago, the Rocky Mountain Trench provided a corridor for the moose population to expand into more southern ranges. As the melt progressed, moose traveled back north again following that early successional habitat they prefer.

In Manitoba, glacial Lake Agassiz eventually drains north into Hudson's Bay. Moose artifacts from the Red River Valley date back 4,500 years. In the big scheme of things, moose have not been living in Manitoba that long and their presence in northern areas of Manitoba is a relatively recent phenomenon. Fast forward



to 1900, and Manitoba records speak of hundreds of moose within 50 miles of Winnipeg, and thousands of moose within 100 miles of Winnipeg. Now, when was the last time you saw a moose on your drive to the lake?

When I lived in Anchorage in the mid-nineties, the winter population of moose in this city of a quarter-million residents swelled to over 1,000 animals. Moose were a calming and welcome reminder of how close we lived to wilderness. In all my encounters, they proved far more agreeable than what could be presumed for a creature of such stature.

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Moose in Anchorage are part of the way of life. The Banjo Bowl moose, however, exposed the lack of experience that we have with moose within city limits. Yet records from the turn of the century speak of hundreds of moose within 50 miles of Winnipeg, and thousands of moose within 100 miles of Winnipeg. What gives?

A BIT ABOUT CALLS AND THE HEAD

You may recognize the birch bark calls that are used to add volume, tone and resonance to moose vocalizations. To further his scientific research, Dr. Crichton took it a step further in creating "Duffy". Duffy is a foam representation of a moose, mounted to a plywood backing, and secured with a repurposed seatbelt. Dr. Crichton is a man of significant stature himself, and with Duffy strapped to his chest, he appears as the big, prime bull. Dr. Crichton will use a moose scapula to beat the bushes and calls to attract attention. With a bull in sight, Duffy will appear and begin rocking back and forth in a display of dominance. This has led to many close encounters for Dr. Crichton and has furthered his study of moose behaviours, health and diseases.

*This is not an activity that should be imitated by amateurs.



In 1982, Dr. Vince Crichton, in his role at the Wildlife Branch, helped implement conservation measures to protect the estimated 30,000 moose remaining in Manitoba. The goal was to rebuild the population to 40,000+ moose before returning to the regular bag limits. Now, in 2019 there are maybe half, maybe 15,000 moose remaining in Manitoba.

In the southern areas of Manitoba, moose were hunted hard anywhere roads and trails provided access, and the population also suffered from habitat loss to agriculture. In the northern areas, moose populations were impacted as roads for logging and mining provided access to new hunting areas. Moose had nowhere to hide. Consider that the biology of a moose has not changed much since they crossed the land bridge about 20,000 years ago. Whereas, hunters have gained the advantage with high-power rifles, ATV's, spotlights, snow-machines, and computerized aids. Hunters that succeed at deploying all the latest technologies but somehow fail to grasp the basics of conservation.

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There is no simple explanation. Moose suffered from increased predation from expanding populations of black bears and gray wolves. Whitetail deer are hosts for liver fluke and brain worm, and their range has increasingly overlapped with moose. When a population is vulnerable, losses to drownings and injury are not insignificant. Moose have survived the worst of 4,500 years in Manitoba browsing on plants and twigs. When something so big and so strong is threatened, it should make us uncomfortable and spark a response.

Think of a moose that is diseased with winter tick. Warmer temperatures in the spring and fall translate into more ticks in the forest. Dr. Crichton documented a moose in Manitoba that was living with over 90,000 ticks. The hair of a moose appears brown, but closer to the roots, it grows white. With a tick infestation to this extent, the moose will rub hard and break the hairs to reveal the appearance of a "ghost moose". With unexpected spring weather, like prolonged cold temperatures, this hairless, tick-infested moose dies of exposure. Respect the animal with such resilience while contemplating the challenges it faces before hunting even comes into play.

There are still 15,000 moose in Manitoba, and don't get me wrong, these numbers can support unlicensed hunting and licensed hunting, where hunters are well-informed and selective. Moose are an important food source and part of the cultural history of many Manitobans. Our boreal forest is also home to fabulous lodges and friendly outfitters with access to record-book animals. Incredible experiences await, when you trust the word of the people who depend on moose for their livelihood. No group wants to see our moose numbers drop. Every group has a role to play in the moose recovery.

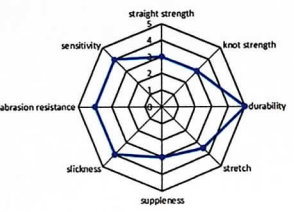
Moose may never return in many areas of south and central Manitoba where humans are concentrated. Moose management involves discrete populations of animals that are bound by limiting features like geography and food supply. If you drill down into the discrete populations of moose that live in Manitoba, you will find over a dozen game hunting areas that have open seasons where there are maybe 100 to 150 moose. For shame. These licensed hunts need to stop because they are in no way sustainable.

Consider one hundred moose; forty are mature cows that are capable of reproducing each year. Those mature cows will give birth to about thirty-eight calves. Only nine of those thirty-eight calves will live to their first birthday. The other twenty-nine calves are killed by bears, wolves, disease, hunting, injuries, drowning or vehicle accidents. Only nine calves



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per one hundred moose, and those same threats of disease and predation continue well beyond a first birthday. Only nine calves per one hundred moose, and now introduce the stress and danger of the rut. Only nine calves per one hundred moose, and now hunters of all varieties.

I own a hunting property in southeastern Manitoba, and within my lifetime moose have disappeared from this area and beyond. Forget about hunting, I wish my daughter and I could walk our property and find sign of moose like leaves stripped from branches, winter barking, or a track. Droppings would prove to be a cause for celebration. Moose are a keystone species, meaning that if you manage only for moose, many other native species will also benefit. This presents an opportunity for hunters to connect with photographers, bird-watchers, and other outdoor enthusiasts with common interests.

If we want moose in Manitoba, to start: conservation closures in the south to reduce the impact of hunting. And, old access roads in the north built for logging and mining should be ripped to preserve remote wilderness areas. These are horrible decisions that we have to make. Government is not getting it done, and that don't change no matter what party is in power. As hunters, we shoulder the responsibility for being informed about our quarry and conservation-minded in our taking of game for food and other purposes.

In the end, the home team Winnipeg Blue Bombers won the Banjo Bowl in 2017, and for many the rest is all a blur. That juvenile bull moose was run ragged and soon died from exposure to an urban environment and all the madness that it involves. Did that moose die in Winnipeg for any particular reason? I'd like to think so. ■



A BIOGRAPHY OF DR. VINCE CRICHTON

DR. VINCE CRICHTON (ALSO KNOWN AS DOC MOOSE), was born at Chapleau in Northern Ontario, and followed the footsteps of his father into the wildlife field. Advanced degrees were completed at the Universities of Manitoba and Guelph in wildlife diseases. Dr. Crichton retired after forty years with Manitoba's Wildlife and Ecosystem Protection Branch where he served in many capacities including Provincial Moose, Elk, Caribou Biologist and prior to retiring, Manager, Game, Fur & Problem Wildlife.

Dr. Crichton has published in scientific journals, popular magazines, and wrote two chapters in the

definitive book "The Ecology and Management of the North American Moose". He has been editor and now associate editor of the moose journal ALCES, and co-editor of the Moose Call newsletter for 12 years. Dr. Crichton is past president of the Manitoba Big Game Trophy Association, has produced a video entitled Moose Close Up and a CD entitled Moose Music, and has been featured in documentaries on the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet.

Dr. Crichton is a hunter, conservationist, university lecturer, guest speaker and amateur photographer and is recognized internationally as an expert on moose biology and management.

His peers awarded him with the Distinguished Moose Biologist Award in 1988 and a special award in 2016 at the 50th North American Moose conference/8th International Moose Symposium (which he co-chaired) for his long standing commitment to these events. He is recognized for his ability to communicate with his peers and the public. Although retired, he is still active in the wildlife game – a strong advocate for public education and for contemporary management programs in these challenging times to ensure there are resources for future generations. Next to family, wildlife runs in his veins.

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