

Man Overboard!

>BY JOHN TOONE, ILLUSTRATION BY SARA WILDE



Of Moose and Men

He calls it Duffy. Carved from heavy foam and mounted to plywood, Duffy tightens with safety belts and balances in a way that almost begs to be swayed and postured. Duffy was handmade by and for Dr. Vince Crichton, also known as Doc Moose. Together they create a formidable pair during the rutting season. And that's no bull!

Unloading Duffy from the truck bed, I appear for a moment like a castoff from *The Mighty Hercules* television program. There are greater powers at work here. It takes smarts to be the big boss, and Doc Moose's passion is rooted in science and conservation. He demonstrates what he calls the language of antlers, and the movements are graceful. To think that moose in Manitoba are in trouble.

We talk issues like overhunting, predators, disease, and human impacts, and we also get into his collection of marvels. We inspect a pair of skulls with antlers locked together from battle. Next, I hold shed antlers with a portion of skull still attached at the base. Meaning there's a bull out there with a hole in his head. This occurs in about 10% of moose (I've observed double those rates in my informal poll of Winnipeg drivers).

Ever wonder how a moose rack changes when a bull is castrated? Doc Moose has a visual for you. Ever wonder

how a bull could be castrated in the wild? Don't ask, because you don't need a visual for that. I listen to and reflect upon his compact-disc of moose calls and vocalizations, and I think that K-Tel should have taken a chance on one of his tracks for their *Explosive Hits* compilations. In all seriousness, a lifetime dedicated to moose creates an impressive and varied body of work.

This is most evident when in the field, sharing discoveries with a wildlife biologist. You learn that when making a wallow, the bull moose will be unsuccessful in his first six attempts to urinate, really. His luck changes on the seventh attempt and then he may plunge head-in to douse his bell in that pungent pool, like a hipster with the beard oil. The bull will progress to the nuzzling stage with a cow in a ritual that I would describe as necking, if that didn't already mean kissing. I cannot make this stuff up. These are the pearls of knowledge found in the woods with an expert. Doc Moose is happy to show you what he has learned.

And no wonder, he is forever watching for sign. He shows me the trembling aspen that was "barked" by moose in the most desperate moments of a cold, late spring. We sit over salt licks in wait, discussing their conductivity. Like snowbirds to tropical drinks with salted rims, the moose keep coming and they do seem

carefree and oblivious. Known as the twig eater, we watch a cow waltz from the lick to strip red osier dogwood limbs like floss through teeth. The twig remains untouched but for all those protein-rich leaves that have become a cheek full of goodness. If you can see a moose, up close and with some understanding of what makes it tick, it sticks. And that is the gift that Doc Moose shares.

I gush because I care. Our government continues to allow hunting in several Manitoba game areas that have moose populations below 150 animals. Shame on you. We walk my woodlot near Prawda and talk of thirty years ago when there were moose in these forests. Never mind hunting, I cannot imagine the thrill that my children and I would get from a glimpse of a moose walking our property. That connection to nature, within my lifetime, was lost for future generations.

Think about a guy so passionate to create Duffy. Late this summer, when I joined Doc Moose and his granddaughter up at Riding Mountain National Park for a bike ride into the back country. He turns and remarks, "I have one hundred stories of moose to tell from this meadow". The story doesn't end here. ■

The four-part series Doc Moose will be released this fall by BellMTS and features rare and unique footage of moose in Manitoba filmed by Dr. Vince Crichton.