

Save our moose

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Young bull moose. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

The way some folks are getting on about moose, one might think we were being overrun by a plague. My biological colleagues are concerned that these introduced heavy weights are chewing up Newfoundland's boreal forest of. I am concerned about other moose matters.

The save-our-people oriented proponents of moose culling are the most vocal contingent decrying the evils of moose. There have been and there will be some very tragic accidents involving motor vehicle collisions with moose. These are sad indeed but accidents are a part of human nature and there is no need to use negative perceptions to remove the creatures from the Newfoundland landscape. There is need to address the problem in more considered ways.

Critical information lacking

Before proceeding with a moose cull and in order to understand and hence to help prevent vehicle – moose collisions, we need comprehensive analysis of the circumstances surrounding these accidents. Alternative and effective solutions are available, but to solve a problem effectively one has to understand it.

Is it a numbers game?

What is the moose population on the island? And what are the population trends? Moose numbers in Terra Nova National Park peaked in the 1990s and are substantially lower now. What is the situation elsewhere?

Most accidents involving moose seem to occur where there is most vehicle traffic (Avalon Peninsula) and not necessarily where there are the most moose (Northern Peninsula). Vehicle traffic seems to have been increasing over the years, but if so, by how much and where? Throughout the year, collisions with moose are highest during summer, likely a consequence of traffic flow and possibly moose movements.

We also need to better understand the distribution of moose. Some hunters content that moose are disproportionately concentrated near highways. This needs to be studied. Alders and young vegetation attract moose to roadsides, and because hunting is rightly not allowed within 300 meters of a road, the TCH and other roadways become de facto protected areas for moose.

Is vigilance a key factor?

Through the course of the day, vehicle accidents involving moose are most frequent during dusk and dawn and at night when moose are most active and human vigilance is most compromised. Are collisions associated with poor weather (fog, rain, snow, ice conditions)?

What are the speeds of vehicles that collide with moose, and what are the consequences of speed for people in the vehicles? How does vehicle size relate to accident outcomes? Are folks in smaller cars at higher risk of serious injury? The most-straight-forward way to enhance vigilance and driver reaction time is to drive slower.

Answerable questions

It would be easy to make educated guesses about the questions posed. But we don't need guesses, because each of the questions is answerable. What is needed is application of a scientific approach to seeking the answers.

Yet no one to my knowledge has made the effort to rigorously evaluate these questions. So with respect motor vehicle accidents, we are proceeding with a moose cull in the absence of relevant information that could lead to more informed and better management decisions that could save lives, both human and moose.

The value of moose

Many hunters and likely most outfitters believe that people will come to regret the decision to radically reduce the moose population. We are fortunate in many ways to have moose, despite the fact they were introduced more than 100 years ago, wandering throughout the island.

The lore and attraction of a Newfoundland moose hunt extends across North America as it does across the island. Last October, while on the ferry to Nova Scotia, it

was amazing to see the vessel packed with hunters' returning to Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Maryland, Virginia and even as far away as Texas. Their pickup trucks had carried freezers full of moose steaks. The economic benefits are being reaped in rural communities.

Straight-forward preventative actions

Some preventive actions are so obvious that they need not be mentioned, except for the fact that they would indeed save lives. Speed limits of 55 km/h at dusk, night and dawn and during summer would help a lot. And though collisions with moose occur when vehicle are moving more slowly, they likely involve less serious injury.

It is unlikely that drivers would accept such restriction. Yet in choosing to drive at high speeds, drivers compromise reaction times and accept greater risks.

The ongoing removal of alder and other vegetation along roadsides could reduce roadside occurrences of moose and increase driver visibility. Radio alerts of moose near roadways seem to be very effective in increasing driver awareness and caution during peak early morning and evening traffic hours.

Broader choices

We are quick to eradicate the symptoms and slow to assess the root causes of environmental problems. At the base of the issue, we need to decide whether or not to accommodate wildlife and environmental inconveniences.

Our list of inconveniences is long - moose, coyotes, seals, free-running rivers and streams, pesty insects, lack of snowmobile access in parks, etc. As our human population continues to grow and expand, so will the inconveniences we encounter. We are on a path of asphalted, fenced and treeless landscapes with grids of channelized waterways. Environmental sterility might be convenient but it certainly isn't healthy.

We benefit more when we work with rather against wildlife and environmental variability. The more we attempt to sanitize or shape nature for our convenience, the riskier the environment becomes. In the long run, such efforts will carry consequences that are much more devastating than having a robust and abundant moose population.

Gannets return to Cape St. Mary's

On 20 April – one year to the day of the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion in the Gulf of Mexico – the gannets were back at Cape St. Mary's. The presence of so many gannets at this time supports our hypothesis that most of the oil-related mortality in the Gulf was absorbed by immature birds that remain there longer before migrating north.

Many gannets on Bird Rock appeared spotted with oil (Ian Jones, Tony Power, Tony Diamond) but they could not be caught for examination.

Birds in the area

With support of the Friends of Cape St. Mary's, manager Tony Power conducted a vessel survey of harlequin ducks and eiders in and around the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve. The results are stunningly encouraging – 400 harlequins and more than 11,000 eiders, including a huge flock of 8,000 near Cat's Cove.

On 2 May, Linda Gaborko and Seth Bennett spotted their first Osprey of the season at Burton's Pond. I am still looking for mine. Belted kingfishers were flitting about Windsor Lake on 20 April (Janet Montevecchi).

At Ramea, Richard Northcott reported horned larks on 13 April and song sparrows on 7 and 13 April. A boisterous and determined male song sparrow was signing in the snow in Musgrave Harbour on 21 April.

Snow buntings were lingering at Cape St. Mary's on 20 April, at Ramea on 21 April and at Tilting on 25 April (Jennifer Keefe).

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