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## **Lessons From Moose**

*By Tenley Bennett, Master Maine Guide*

A north wind was blowing snow sideways across the lake. I was hunkered down close to the woodstove, its warmth and the monochromatic view from my window provided little inspiration for moving to my computer to complete my on-line moose permit application...for the 30<sup>th</sup> time. I, like many of you, have unsuccessfully played the moose lottery but I'm not a quitter and my maximum bonus points could surely increase my odds of being selected. But either way, I will be "hunting" moose again this fall as a guide.

Staring through the window at the wind-whipped snow, my mind wandered and wrote its own script on the white screen in front of me. I replayed in vivid detail past moose hunts I'd guided, some more memorable than others. Wayne and I have learned a thing or two over the years in pursuit of Maine's largest big game animal.

We receive the excited calls each June from clients who've been selected to hunt moose in Maine. Virgin moose hunters, when they call us, have no idea the adventure they're about to embark on. The experienced who call know, but their knowledge creates a different type of anticipation though no less excitement. Yet it never ceases to amaze us how many don't realize their hunt begins the day their name is called out at the annual lottery. Right then and there the annual moose hunt begins, first with a sense of celebration for being selected - which is only eclipsed later with a filled tag. Getting from "point A" (being awarded a permit) to "point B" (filled tag) requires weeks, months, of preparation. The successful among you will make it your job for the weeks following the lottery to meticulously plan and execute your hunt - either that or you'll get darned lucky. The others, those who will go home frustrated and depressed that their tag was wasted, will know the truth - they could have done better. Which will you be?

Maine's Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife makes available a very good Moose Hunters Guide; read it. Lots of valuable information is contained within the pages. What it doesn't tell you are the lessons learned while actually hunting moose. These "secrets" can only be told by the moose still standing, or experienced moose hunters and guides. These are the lessons I've learned and of course each has a story to go along with it but some are pretty self-explanatory; you can imagine how the hunts played out as these lessons were learned.

1) Know your firearm. Shoot, shoot, and shoot some more before your hunt so you know where your bullet will hit to make a clean kill and minimize wounding or missing. You must have 100% confidence when you squeeze that trigger that your bullet will hit *exactly* where you've aimed. The week before your hunt is NOT the time to dust off the old .06 you haven't hunted

with in 20 years! If you haven't already, start shooting and sighting in your firearm, today! We've quit keeping track of misses and poor shot placement but believe me when I say it averages 4 or 5 to 1, at least. But oh, the beauty of a well placed shot!

2) Never bring a malfunctioning firearm on a hunt. Why take a chance of the gun jamming when you're standing face to face with a 55" bull at 65 yards. It's a bummer. Buy a new gun or get yours repaired by a professional gunsmith.

3) Trophy bulls especially, but any moose, can shake up the most seasoned hunters among us. You must remain focused and calm. This can definitely be a "head game" especially to hunters who have never hunted big game or who have never seen a live moose prior to the hunt. Here's a technique that can help, lots of athletes use it - visualization. Visualize your hunt whether you have a bull or antlerless tag. Create scenarios in your mind in great detail. Anticipate how you will react – see yourself *successfully* participating in the scenario, calm, controlled. See yourself exit the vehicle or facing a live moose that has been called to you, patiently loading your firearm, aiming, looking down the barrel at a moose, finding the kill zone, squeezing the trigger, and the moose falling. Replay those visualizations and include visualizations of things happening quickly because...

4) Moose don't always stand still very long. You must be ready to load, aim and shoot quickly and accurately to take advantage of good shot options as they are presented.

5) Be prepared to take 100-150 yard shots. Some shots will be less than that, some may be more, but 100 yards down a skidder trail or across a wide open clear cut is not a difficult shot to take if you practiced rule number 1. Guides will not expect you to take shots longer than that which you are comfortable. Be honest with your guide and yourself. If shots *less than* 100 yards are within your comfort zone, tell us. We can make that happen – maybe not on the first moose you see, but probably before the end of the week. If you're hunting on your own, be selective and shoot only at distances with which you're comfortable.

6) Be prepared to track a wounded moose. If you're guided, your guide will spend all day tracking if indications are a dead moose at the end of the track. Self-guided hunters should be prepared to do the same. You can minimize the length of the track if you *wait* after knowingly wounding. Fill that time by getting your gear ready, have a little lunch, just relax. In some cases the adventure has just begun if the moose has to be packed out.

7) *Never quit*. Six days is not much time for that "once in a lifetime" opportunity so keep your head in the game and be alert at all times. The weather can raise havoc on a moose hunt. You're stuck with the six days you were assigned so make the most of it by being "in the field" at day break and don't stop until the sun sets. If you're hunting without a guide, scout! In the weeks leading up to the hunt visit your zone for several days if for no other reason that to learn the "lay of the land" and road system. You won't have time during the first few days of the hunt to get oriented. Locals, biologists, and wardens in the field will offer you advice on where to find moose but if you don't know the lay of the land you'll have difficulty finding those sweet spots

they describe. If you're on a guided hunt and the days are slipping by, trust your guide. Guides don't quit so you shouldn't either. You'll be tired, frustrated, discouraged but things can change at any moment so be prepared. After the hunt there will be plenty of time to sleep! If you've wounded a moose, stay with the track until you are 100% certain that moose will live. If you find your moose at the end of the track and far from the road, be prepared to quarter it and pack it out; it is your responsibility – and the law – to recover your moose.

8) Trust your guide. We've spent many hours observing and learning from moose in all seasons. We've learned a great deal about their behavior. We read their body language – we watch their ears, head carriage, movement - it tells us what they'll do next. Sometimes you'll have all the time in the world to take a shot, other times we know that moose will run at the slightest movement or noise. We don't like to put additional pressure on our clients but, we know moose behaviors so be still when we tell you and shoot when we say "shoot". Review #4 and #5. You can only imagine the times we've watched moose walk off or run while clients made unnecessary movements or noise when stalking or calling moose after we've asked them to be still or quiet. There are also the times we've recommend clients shoot yet they seem unprepared to do so. If you're worried how you will react while taking a shot on a moose, read #3, again – I can't stress this enough. Worse yet, your single, well-placed shot puts a moose to the ground and you think you're done but the moose jumps to its feet and runs off. Your tag isn't filled until it is attached to the moose.

9) Youth have displayed more self discipline and focus than many adults. They are a pleasure to guide.

10) Some of my best memories have been made while learning from moose, either on a hunt or while studying them in the wild.

As I entered my data into the moose lottery system I promised myself I would share my moose hunting lessons with this year's lucky lottery winners in an attempt to minimize some of the pitfalls they would surely encounter. For every one of you selected to hunt moose there are others envious of your luck of the draw. Understand, many who won't be hunting moose this fall would have made every preparation to be successful given the opportunity and a permit – you represent them. If you haven't already, you still have time to make it your job to prepare for your hunt. If you don't feel up to the task of a self-guided hunt, I encourage you to hire any one of the experienced and professional Maine guides who make it their job to execute successful moose hunts. Consult the Maine Professional Guides Association web site for lots of leads. Your story can have a successful and memorable ending, or you can get lucky, or go home empty handed. Which will it be?

Good luck, and be safe out there!