

LIGHTS and SHADOWS

from the
Dishman Hills



MOOSE ON THE LOOSE

The Dishman Hills Natural Area (DHNA) has added moose to its unusually varied fauna and flora. On our blustery, wet April 8 hike, I showed moose browsed Aspens and resulting woody browse scat. So, our fearless leader (Michael) asked your ex-fearless leader (Lawrence Thieman) to write this article. In the early spring, after snow melt, we have about 15 temporary Lower Hills ponds. Before snow melt and after ponds dry, there are very few reliable water sources for resident fauna. So, I occasionally remove excess leaves that plug Hidden Spring. E.g., the largest Lower Hills porcupine den is nearby, with a well-worn trail to the spring. The Lost Pond has a NE outlet, but the stream runs mostly underground, resurfacing at Hidden Spring and near the main trail and goes underground again before re-emerging in Goldback Spring.

March 5, I saw moose scat in the Hidden Spring spillover, but assumed it was just unusually large deer/elk scat swollen by continual spring water overflow. I've hiked the Hills since 1966 and had never seen, tracked or heard of a moose here, though I'd tracked bear, cougar and most everything else in the lower/upper Hills/elsewhere. March 12, near Hidden Spring, I discovered more woody browse moose scat piles (very different from summer plant based scat) and knew we had a moose on the loose. So I began tracking and shortly saw the cow moose 80 ft away, hiding behind a screen of two pine trees, they do this for a living. The moose withdrew to the same ridge where it first resided, the first dozen scat piles. In tracking, I've watched its quick learning curve in our topography/habitats, and counted 37 piles (not my primary purpose, so I assume there are many more). Indicating it's been here at least several weeks.

I was somewhat concerned, because Ponderosa/Douglas is not moose habitat, they prefer Spruce forest, swamps, Aspen and Willow thickets. Our only forest moose habitat is a few ponds, with Aspen-Birch-Cottonwood-Willow, but no preferred water plants. The tracks/scat indicated Hidden Spring proximity for a week. Possibly with a slightly injured favored leg, heightened by the fact Lost Pond-around which no moose tracks/scat (similar to but much larger than elk/deer) were yet seen, was only a few blocks distant. After observing from a respectable distance, I ran into an acquaintance hiker, who said he'd just seen cougar tracks. I showed the moose and took a couple pictures in fading light. My next visit 3-16, I tracked again, coming within 150 ft before it registered my presence. It was browsing older Aspen twigs at the Lost Pond (much better than the desperate pine scrapings etc. I'd seen-but the plant season is now beginning), reaching up to 11 ft high. Its leg seemed fine and it seemed happier with suitable habitat.

I'd only been within 80 ft of a wild moose once before here, a large, fall, antlered bull Moose which stared me down at Turnbull. They are still rare here, especially S of the city. They're moving from the Rocky divide into NE Washington, down to Mt Spokane/Newman Lake (e.g.3-25-06 Spokesman-Review Newman Lake picture). To get to the DHNA, they have to cross 1-90 or south of CDA Lake and there is little habitat much beyond Tower Mountain, where the forest rapidly gives way to farmland/Columbia basin. Moose, the largest "lower 48" animal are impressive up close and personal. Standing 7 ft at the shoulder, males 900-1500 lbs, females 700-1100, 5" to 6" tracks, can run silently 35 mph through the forest. Cf. Whitetail -3 1/4 ft shoulder, M 250 lbs, F 200; Elk- 4 3/4' shoulder, M "600 to 1089", F ca 550; black bear ca 350 lbs, lower 48 grizzly- under 1000 lbs. In the lower 48 moose apparently don't

experience much natural predation, we largely extirpated wolves and considerably downsized bears (90 to 98% vegetarian/insect based anyway. Yellowstone studies indicated wolves/grizzlies killed only 2%/16% respectively). Which may aid moose expansion, despite countervailing trends such as declining Western Aspen stands. Be respectful of these "unpredictable and dangerous" animals, especially as calving time approaches June 1. Bulls antlers are missing until growth begins in April, so you may mistake a cow for a more restless bull. Moose are "normally retiring and avoid human contact", except "fiercely protective cows with calves" and rutting bulls "have charged people, horses, cars and locomotives" (ouch). Figures/quotes largely from Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals. The late calving time probably reflects its cold northern habitat, via altitude (Rocky Mt divide) or latitude. The Valley's low latitude/altitude combination must be near the mild climactic edge of their existing habitat. Moose have also been moving into Oregon from Idaho, usually at higher altitudes-every 1000 ft altitude is equal to climate 600 miles farther north. As relatively solitary animals, moose aren't organized enough to have their own web site yet, but if you'd like to learn more about our animal friends, report unusual sightings or studies, try www.fish.washington.edu/nature_mapping/wildlife, or www.birdweb.org.

ORGANIZATION NEWS

We are a non-profit organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have any questions. We meet every other month on the third Tuesday at Opportunity Elementary School, S. 1109 Wilbur, in the teacher's lounge, 7pm. Our next meeting will be May 15th.

The following are our March donors that have consented to be listed: Marva Goede, Don Griffiths, Larry & Tody Hatch, Don & Gloria Nicol, Ambrose Priestley, Lorna Ream, Norma Rosenberger, Stephanie Schrimshire, Lee Smith, Dorothy Torney, Jeanne Wilson, Richard Young, and one anonymous donor. Thank you sincerely for your support.

*Animals are such agreeable friends, they ask no questions,
Pass no criticisms.* George Eliot, English Novelist (1819-1880)

HAPPY EARTH DAY !

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