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Snow Surveying in Moose Country Can Be Dangerous

by

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I started snow surveying the winter of 1956 in the Southwestern part of Wyoming. I have had many interesting and dangerous experiences happen since that time but I believe my experience with a cow Moose was about as bad as any I encountered.

It happened on the 1st of May, 1970. It was my last snow survey for the year and then I was headed home.

At that time I was measuring about fifteen courses and using a four pontoon Tucker Snow Cat.

On my first day each month I measured two snow courses and a precipitation gauge about thirty miles out of Cokeville, Wyoming and then traveled to Big Piney, Wyoming. The next day I would leave Big Piney and measure four snow courses, a precipitation gauge and a snow pillow. I traveled approximately twenty five miles by truck and then seventy eight miles via snow cat round trip to the head of Greys River and LaBarge and SmithsFork Creeks which is a tri-basin divide. Water from this tri-basin divide runs into the Colorado River, Columbia River and the Great Salt Lake. This was usually a fifteen to sixteen hour trip if everything went well. If trouble happened we sometimes stayed in Ranger Stations either at LaBarge Meadows or Snider Basin. The next day I would travel twenty five miles via truck and another sixty miles via snow cat and measured two snow courses and into Pinedale, Wyoming. I usually spent one or two days measuring snow in the Pinedale area depending on how the other snow cat in that location had done and then started for home measuring three snow courses and a precipitation gauge on my way by way of Hoback and Snake River Canyons.

I left Pinedale very early the morning of the 1st of May and measured two courses and a precipitation gauge and arrived at The Point on the Hoback course there. It was a beautiful clear day and the crust was hard.

On the last run the day before my snow cat had a serious growl in the transmission and after checking it I discovered there was a bearing going out and it was only three miles to the Bryan Flat course so I decided to hike in rather than having trouble with the snow cat and not being able to load it again.

On the 1st of April when I had made the survey there had been a movie company from Iowa making some winter scenes at the Rim Rock Ranch which was three miles on up the canyon from Bryan Flat Ranger Station and they had used small machines to go back and forth and the trail was well packed and hard. I figured I could walk in and measure the snow course and be back before the crust went out and the trail got soft.

I put the snow measuring kit in my back pack and fastened my snow shoes on and headed for the course. Even though the crust was hard it was easier to walk with the snow shoes on than to pack them on my back. It was a little after nine A.M. and I reached the Ranger Station between ten and ten thirty. I did not make too fast time as it was a gradual uphill slope.

When I arrived at the North end of the snow course I noticed several Moose near the course between the fourth and fifth sample stations. I did not think too much about it as there are always quite a few Moose in this area and they had never bothered us at any time during previous surveys.

I put the snow tubes together, fastened the scales to my ski poles and put the book on a clip board which was hanging around my neck with a leather lace. There was nineteen to twenty inches of snow and the crust was starting to soften up so that I was breaking through occasionally on the snow shoes. Sample one was near the Ranger Station and the sample stations were one hundred feet apart and the course ran south along a few small aspen and lodge pole pines to the fourth sample and then out across an open flat. The first four sample stations were also along a side hill.

I measured the first two samples and as I walked to the third three of the Moose walked up the hill thirty or forty yards but the fourth which was a calf was laying down between the fourth and fifth sample posts. It did not concern me too much but I did see the hair on the cows neck standing up as though she was getting upset. I read the third sample and noticed the cow had moved back down the hill a few feet from the other two young bulls and they were working their way on up the hill. She was still about forty yards up the hill and watching me closely. I read the fourth sample and the calf still had not moved.

There were a few small Aspen about thirty feet from sample four and the rest of the samples went out across the flat. (Ten samples altogether.) I measured the fourth sample and noticed the cow was getting quite nervous. The calf was quite thin from the long hard winter and was not very active but I thought as I got near him he would run up to his mother and they would leave. I started toward the calf and the fifth sample and as I got near him I reached out and gave him a poke with the cutter end of the snow tube. He jumped up and started up the hill but the cow re-acted much different than I had expected. I looked up and she was coming at me on a run and I knew I had to do something fast. I dropped every thing but the snow tubes and raised the tube to try and hit her in the eye to try and stop her but I knew it was quite hopeless. I realized in a flash that I had made a sad mistake and went again all the teachings I had been taught as a hunter to never take any chances with a cow Moose that had a calf near by but it was too late and I had to make the best of

it. As I raised the tube to try and jab her my left foot broke through the rotten crust and I hit her just above the eye. It cut her enough to draw blood but the force of the blow knocked the tube from my hand and sent it down the hill about twenty feet and knocked me flat on my back as she went over the top of me. By this time she had up plenty of momentum and the force of it sent her down the hill about thirty feet before she got stopped. I knew I was in for it then as this placed me directly between her and the calf. I knew she would be after me again and I was in a very precarious position to try and fight her off. I turned onto my stomach trying to reach the straps of my snow shoes as I was almost helpless in the soft snow with them on. I just got turned over and was trying to get the straps undone when she charged again. I figured it was all over and I thought what a place for them to find me tromped to death by an angry Moose. As she got about to hit me I dropped flat on my stomach and she went over the top of me again. One foot struck me in the side and tore my shirt and under clothes ripping down by ribs and taking some hide also. It also about knocked the wind from me but I was lucky she did not get me with the other feet. The commotion and scared the calf up the hill about thirty or forty yards toward the two bulls that were standing there watching what was going on. The cow went up by the calf which gave me a few precious seconds to jerk off my snow shoes and clamber about twenty feet to two Aspens which were about two feet apart.

When the cow made her next charge I dodged around these two trees and for about four or five minutes we played ring around the rosy with her trying to get to me and I was stepping between and around the trees to keep from her. I was yelling at her at the top of my lungs trying to frighten her away.

Finally she gave up and went back up by the calf and the other two Moose that were slowly working their way up the hill.

I stayed by the trees for nearly an hour as she would come part way down to where I was and then back to the calf undecided as to what she should do. I did not want to move out into the open area and excite her again as I knew any unnecessary movement on my part would do so.

Finally after about an hour they all made it to the top of the ridge about one hundred yards and I started to gather up the tubes, scales, ski poles and the book which had come loose from the clip board around my neck and was some place in the snow. The tube was not damaged and after drying out the scales with my handkerchief and getting the book so I could take notes I continued to finish reading the course. I was not about to go out across the flat and get away from the protection of the trees so I decided to take the other six samples in a circle near the trees where the snow had not been disturbed. The course was fairly even at all the samples so it turned out pretty good.

After completing the survey I worked my way along the trees to the ranger station about two hundred yards north of me. The cow followed me along the ridge which ran directly behind the station.

The crust was completely gone by this time and I was sinking into my knees in the soft wet snow even with the snow shoes on so I took them off and tied them on my back on top of the pack and started to wallow back to the truck three miles away. I had a few trees for about one quarter of a mile before I started across a large flat. A telephone line crossed the flat toward the truck and there was poles about one hundred and fifty yards apart. I worked my way from pole to pole so that I would have some kind of protection in case she attacked me again as she was

watching from the end of the ridge above me. She watched me until I was nearly a mile from her and then turned back up the ridge.

It took me nearly an hour and a half to get back to the truck through the soft wet snow and I was mighty wet as I had taken off my ski pants that morning and just had on levi overalls.

During the ordeal up to this time I do not remember being very scared, probably as things were happening so fast I did not have time but as I walked toward the truck I realized the danger I had been in and what a foolish thing I had done and I started to get sick at my stomach and I was shaking all over as the shock started to set in. By the time I reached the truck I was throwing up and very sick. I layed down on the bare ground by the truck and rested for some time as I was afraid to try and drive the truck down the canyon until I had settled down and got control of myself.

After I had rested for awhile and felt a little better I loaded the equipment into the truck and was just leaving when two men (brothers) that owned the Rim Rock Ranch came by from Jackson. They had come in from the ranch early that morning to get supplies and had planned on trying to intercept me and warn me of the Moose before I went in but they were detained on business and had not got back in time. They were going to warn me and tell me that members of the movie company had been tormenting the Moose on snow machines during the time they were going in and out to the ranch and this was what had caused the cow to be on the fight. I informed them as to what had taken place and they thought I was mighty lucky to get away alive and I certainly agreed with them.

I decided I would apply for a Moose permit that fall and get even with one of them. I got the permit and got my Moose but it was not the one that was after me. I am sure she was not to blame as she was only doing what comes naturally for wild animals to try and protect their young.

I have hunted all my life and been around Moose many times. They have never scared me mainly because I always had a big game rifle in my hands and knew I was not in much danger. I certainly received a good lesson and show them much respect now as one experience like that is plenty during one's life.

Submitted by:

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Editor's note: Jack Harmon broke just about every rule that all snow surveyors are supposed to adhere to and was indeed lucky that he was not killed during his moose experience. As you follow our articles this year, you will read about interesting and humorous experiences that happened because of "a series of unfortunate events". In a subsequent article, one of our hydrologists, Tony Tolsdorf, will write about our Snow Survey Training School that is held annually and is mandatory for all new snow surveyors. The school also provides a refresher for seasoned veterans that may have allowed their skills and wilderness sense to get a little rusty. Tony's article is entitled: "Doin' it right and comin' back alive!" The mandatory attendance at this school is our way of keeping those "unfortunate events" at a minimum. T. Perkins