

a New Hampshire

MOO

Sweeping views of the Acworth hills from Gates Mountain are one reward for Alan and Cheryl Briere's moose-hunting efforts.

SEEKING SIGNS HUNT

the experience is the trophy

We were going to get a moose. For years, I'd been talking to other folks that have been entering the moose lottery, and the feelings are always the same; there's an expectant giddiness and a big grin if the gods have smiled on you. If your name is not pulled, at least you've got the old New England stoicism and the resolve that "next year will be my year."

The odds that one of us would be selected for the New Hampshire moose hunt were low enough, but for my wife Cheryl and I to *both* be drawn? It was unbelievably good luck.

Two permits in one household was frankly a little embarrassing. When we contacted friends and family to announce our good fortune, most were full of heartfelt congratulations. Some that hadn't been drawn responded in a cheerful, envious, *you're a bum* sort of way. We figured two permits would mean double the scouting, double the cost, probably four times the work — and, we'd need a second freezer if we were successful in filling both tags. So we declined my permit and kept Cheryl's, which was for our home wildlife management unit, and I became her moose-hunt partner or "subpermittee."

Seeking Signs

After the double-lucky drawing, 2004 revolved solely around the October moose hunt. I'm the sort of guy that likes to make sure I have as much information as possible before jumping in with both feet. There was so much to do — get in shape, practice our marksmanship, find some spots where moose would be hanging out in October... and arrange for a team of professional wrestlers to carry the animal out of the woods if we got lucky.

One thing was certain: we wanted to hunt close to home. Staff from Fish and Game's Region 4 office in Keene helped us out by providing historical moose harvest information, pointing us in the right direction for our area. We also took in Fish and Game's moose seminar, where we learned the basics of moose scouting and hunting, and what biologists do to measure and test the moose that hunters bring in.

At first, the demands of planning for the moose hunt made me feel unexpectedly removed from all that I know about how hunting feels. For me, hunting is the smell of decaying leaves on the forest floor, the first hard frost on wild apples under a tree at a long-abandoned farmstead and the snort of a startled

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“We’d chosen some beautiful scouting locations – classic New Hampshire woodlands laced with woods roads.” (right)

“For me, hunting is the smell of decaying leaves on the forest floor...and the snort of a startled whitetail.” (below)



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whitetail. Hunting is curious chipmunks and seemingly tame chickadees; it’s the feel of the forest itself. It envelops you when you walk out into it like a comfortable old jacket. So we could hardly wait for the hunt to begin, and the feeling of knowing that we’d made all our preparations and the rest was out of our hands.

In the meantime, we’d chosen some beautiful scouting locations — classic New Hampshire woodlands laced with woods roads and stone walls built by farmers long gone. How could moose not be found in places named Cathole Swamp or White Birch Hill? Our pre-hunt scouting was not very reassuring, but we covered a lot of ground, and we did find some tracks, plus some old sign that moose had been feeding in certain areas.

Only one set of tracks still had a moose standing in them, and that was up on Gates Mountain in our hometown of Acworth. Since this was two days before the Saturday season opener, it seemed like a good spot to start.

Rhythm of the Hunt

That first morning on Gates Mountain, the weather was cool and clear. We climbed through low forage and resting cover, stepping over ankle-



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breaking blowdowns covered by tangles of blackberry canes and creeping vines, a wonderfully wild place that's the result of an ongoing forest management program. The area is closed to offroad vehicles, so shooting a moose here could make getting it out of the woods difficult. It was clear that the area sees moose traffic, though — tracks were numerous and a bed in the grass on the rocky summit proved that even wild creatures seem to appreciate a room with a view.

We peeled off jackets to vent the heat generated on the hike up and took time to admire the Acworth hills and forests stretching out before us. Under graying skies, a trio of Canada geese appeared just yards away as they rode the updrafts and cruised across the summit mere feet above our heads. As we continued our planned loop through the forest below, we heard and saw deer, songbirds, ravens and enough grouse to have us thinking about trading in rifles for shotguns. The moose, it seemed, were not as willing to show themselves. The rest of the day turned from gray to drizzle to a soaking rain. Then evening came, and the aches brought about from a long day hauling rifles and heavy backpacks over rough terrain chased us home for a hot meal and an early night.

Dawn on Sunday found us on the road back to Gates Mountain to explore the lower slopes. We left one vehicle at the foot of the mountain and planned a route that would deposit us right at the car, so we could leave some of the gear at either end of the hike. That way when we got our moose, extra equipment would be nearby. Well, that's what we planned... The moose had other plans!

Nonetheless, Cheryl and I were really getting into the rhythm of the hunt. October in New Hampshire is a stunning time. We were alone in a riot of red and gold leaves, brilliant against a backdrop of dependable evergreens and a gray sky that signified the possibility of almost any type of weather. We had imagined running into other moose hunters, but we never did.

When we returned home for lunch (a benefit of hunting close to home), we came across a grouse hunter that had us all laughing as he related the tale of two young bull moose that ran noisily past him as he was attending to the call of nature. I can't imagine a greater feeling of vulnerability than close proximity to rutting moose at such a moment.

Fresh Tracks

Monday, already the third day of the hunt. The sun was shining, but our spirits sagged. Would we be among the 25 percent of New Hampshire moose hunters that aren't successful? We were having a wonderful time, even if we were starting to think we'd see more moose if it weren't for all those beautiful leaves cutting down the visibility. We had to accept the fact that our long-awaited hunt may not end with meat in the freezer.

On Tuesday, we headed out from the house on foot. Within an hour, we were rewarded with fresh tracks and renewed confidence. The ravens were our constant companions and had now achieved personal totem status. The heavy packs had become a necessary nuisance we were used to — and our shoulders couldn't get any stiffer anyway! Lunchtime came and the afternoon wore on. A light mist started falling, and we decided to head for home.

To our utter disbelief, a cow moose trotted out of the forest and crossed the woods road in plain view. We had hiked nearly 25 miles over four days in three townships; we were tired, aching in nearly every muscle. It was 4:20 in the afternoon and here, within a mile of our home, was the only moose we'd seen! Unreal. We dropped our packs and, knowing the terrain,

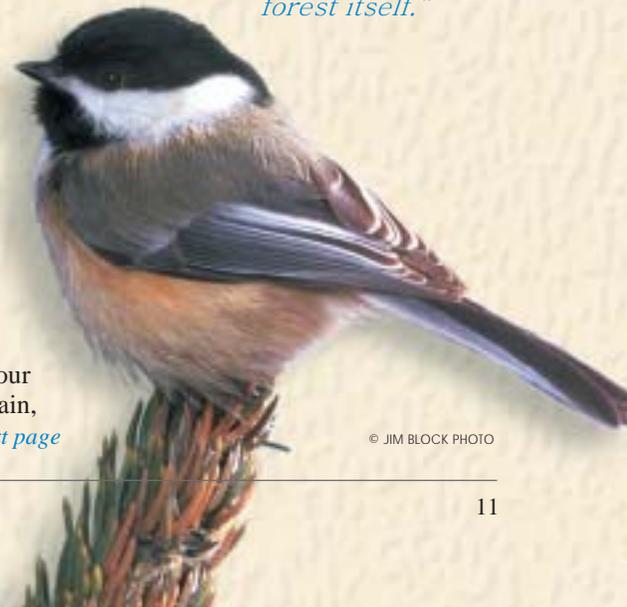
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"Our pre-hunt scouting was not very reassuring, but we did find some tracks..."

"Hunting is curious chipmunks and seemingly tame chickadees; it's the feel of the forest itself."



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MY TURN:

Cheryl's Moose Hunt Story

"Can I actually do this? Do I have what it takes to hunt and shoot a moose?" Those were my first thoughts when Alan called me at work to tell me that we both had gotten moose permits. I can't begin to describe the thrill and astonishment — and fear — of actually getting the chance to hunt for moose. How did it come to this?

Four years ago we bought a Brittany puppy. Gypsy and Alan would go off hunting and come home with pheasant or grouse, all smiles. Being a little jealous that they were having too much

fun, I tagged along one Saturday to get a taste of what bird hunting was all about. After that day, I decided that I didn't want to miss this field time with my husband and dog. So, at age 50, I passed New Hampshire's hunter education class and bought a hunting license so I could hunt birds and deer.

Having come from a family of hunters, I was not new to the use of guns, and I love "plinking." At Becoming an Outdoors-Woman one year, I got to practice with the laser rifle and "shot" all heart shots on the video. Does that make me ready to actually shoot at a live target? I have yet to hit a grouse or pheasant, but maybe a larger target would be easier! When we were chosen for the moose hunt, I knew I'd get the chance to find out.

Alan and I spent four days in the woods before even seeing "our" moose. I can't begin to describe hiking the Acworth hills. The views at the top were beautiful, but there weren't any moose there. It is amazing how noisy the woods are; we listened to the grouse as they flushed, the ravens overhead, coyotes yipping on the next ridge. We probably missed a few sightings because we were so intent on checking for hoofprints, scat, any sign that a moose might be nearby.

At times, walking down a trail, talking quietly, it felt as if Alan and I were the only two people on the planet. The bonding experience was very special; but at the end of the day, going home bone-tired, with aching feet and tired shoulders, and still having to take the dogs for a good run, became overwhelming. Desolation set in on the fourth day of the hunt, when we had yet to even see a moose. When we finally saw "our" moose, I couldn't believe it — I actually thought I imagined her. Alan and I looked at each other and asked, is that a real moose? She just stood there, looking over her shoulder, as if to say, "Here I am."

It was not in the cards for me to take the shot. When it came down to it, I was looking at the moose's hindquarters, and she was walking away from me. I looked over at Alan, who gave me a "thumbs up." I turned mine down, nodded and gave him the "go ahead" sign. He took the shot and put her down. I heard the moose take two steps and fall.

When I reached her, the moose was already gone. She was young and beautiful, with soft fuzzy ear hair that felt like silk. Her coat was exquisite. She has fed many of our family and friends this past year, and we honor her with a blessing each time.

— Cheryl Briere

Success at last! Cheryl Briere fills out the tag prior to assisting with field dressing the moose.

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tried to guess where the moose would go.

I took a parallel angle and Cheryl followed the path the cow had taken. Within a minute, we found the cow; Cheryl's angle was bad, so a single shot from my 30-06 ended our hunt. It was a solemn moment as we knelt next to this beautiful animal to thank her. Cheryl tagged the moose and together we field dressed it. As darkness fell and the rain intensified, I laid my hunting coat over the cow moose and did my level best to — how do I say this? — mark the territory in an effort to discourage predators. We left the rest for morning.

"Nice gut pile!"

At dawn on day five, a group of friends — unfortunately not professional wrestlers — came to assist us. Our moose lay untouched where we had left her. I was surprised at the ease with which a few willing folks with an ATV and a tow strap can extract a moose from the woods. I never thought I would consider the phrase "Nice gut pile!" to be such a compliment when uttered by a friend. At the check station we swapped stories with other successful hunters who, like us the day before, had shifted into "We're not going to get one" mode.

On our way to the processor, Cheryl caught me repeatedly looking into the back of the pickup. "What's the matter? Don't worry, she's still there," she reassured me. I just couldn't believe it. After our butcher expertly removed the hide, we delivered it to the taxidermist, who prepped it for tanning. The hide will be our keepsake, but the experience is the trophy. The outdoor writer Bob Washburn had referred to our luck in the lottery as "catching lightning in a bottle." He was right about that — and about the fact that our initial good luck would persist through an unforgettable moose hunt adventure. 

Alan Briere is an award-winning photographer and outdoor writer based in Acworth, N.H.



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