



# LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

## MOOSE IN MASSACHUSETTS



Historically, moose roamed the forests of Massachusetts. However, by the early 1700s, unregulated hunting and extensive forest clearing for pastures and farming by early settlers led to their disappearance. Moose began to appear again in greater numbers in Massachusetts starting around the 1980s, expanding south from neighboring states. Moose populations grew in northern New England from a combination of forest cutting practices and protection from unregulated hunting. We now have moose in most of western and central Massachusetts, with occasional sightings in eastern Massachusetts.

### DESCRIPTION

Moose are the largest members of the deer family in North America. In the fall, an adult cow (female) moose can weigh from 500 to 700 pounds and a bull (male) moose can weigh from 600 to over 1,000 pounds. They can stand up to 6 feet tall at the shoulder and have long legs 3–4 feet in length, which allow them to walk in deep snow. Only bulls grow antlers, which begin growing in March to early April and are fully grown by August when the velvet is shed. Antlers are shed beginning in December, though some young bulls retain their antlers until late winter. Moose have large, almost horse-like heads, with a flap of skin that hangs beneath their chin called a bell, which is more pronounced in adult bulls than in cows or immature bulls. Moose vary in color from

light brown to almost black, with the face generally dark brown or black on bulls, and light brown on cows.

### LIFE HISTORY

Moose are most active at dawn and dusk. The breeding period for moose runs from September to October. Moose travel more during this time in pursuit of a mate. Females typically don't breed until 2 or 3 years of age, and give birth to usually 1 calf between late May and the end of June. Moose calves weigh 20–25 pounds at birth. By fall they will have gained nearly 300 pounds! The other period of high moose activity is in May, when the young of the past year are driven off by the adult cow before she calves. Unlike deer, moose offspring stay close to their mother after birth and she may actively protect her calf.

Because of their large size and strength, adult moose have very few natural predators, which explains their general lack of fear of humans and bold behavior. However, young, sick or injured moose can succumb to predation by black bears or coyotes. In Massachusetts, most moose die from vehicle collisions, accidents in the wild (drowning, falls, etc.), disease, starvation, and old age. In recent years, climate change, winter tick, Brainworm (a tiny parasite carried by white-tailed deer), liver flukes, and a combination of stressors have become significant factors for moose populations.

## FOOD, HABITS, AND HABITAT

Moose, like deer, lack upper incisors; they strip off browse (twigs and other plants) and bark rather than snipping it neatly. Moose eat large amounts of leaves, twigs, and buds, as well as sodium-rich aquatic vegetation in the summer. Willows, aspens, maples, oaks, fir, and viburnums are their preferred foods. Land areas recently logged or disturbed by fire, wind events, or beavers provide excellent moose habitat as these sites contain new plant growth. In the summer, moose tend to seek food and relief from flies and mosquitoes by spending time in wetlands. Winter food mostly consists of buds and twigs, needle bearing trees, and hardwood bark. A healthy adult moose can eat 40–60 pounds of browse daily.

## TIPS FOR RESIDENTS

**VIEWING MOOSE:** Moose are surprisingly elusive, especially considering their large size. If you are lucky enough to see a moose, stay a respectful distance away to enjoy this magnificent animal. In most cases, the moose will move off. Try to avoid startling a moose. During the breeding season in fall, or the calving season in spring, be especially cautious because bulls can be unpredictable and cows can be very protective of their calves. Keep dogs leashed and under control. Moose are unwary as they move through populated areas, particularly during the mating season.

Moose, especially yearlings, will sometimes appear in densely populated areas, having followed waterways or forests into the heart of an urban center. Never try to approach or pursue a moose. Pursuit not only stresses the animal, but it adds the risk of having a moose chased out into traffic or into a group of bystanders. Wildlife professionals recommend letting the moose find its way out of populated areas and into nearby forested areas. However, when too many people congregate around the moose, it can become stressed and feel cornered. Occasionally, trained staff from MassWildlife and/or the Environmental Police may need to use immobilizing drugs to take a moose out of a dangerous public safety situation.

**MOOSE-VEHICLE COLLISIONS:** Be particularly alert, especially at night during the fall breeding season (September–October) and during yearling dispersals, when yearling moose are driven away by their mother (May–June). Moose will step out onto a roadway without showing the slightest concern for oncoming traffic. The dark body is difficult to see and their eyes are much higher than those of white-tailed deer, so are often not reflected back from headlights. Because they are so heavy and have long legs, the body often will come through the windshield and onto the driver, making collisions extremely dangerous. Swerving to avoid a moose can be equally dangerous, so please drive slowly and hit your brake if you see a moose.



Moose are an important natural resource in Massachusetts and their recent return is a testament to the state's high quality wildlife habitat and management. Moose hunting is prohibited in Massachusetts. If a moose is in a highly populated area, leave the moose alone and call MassWildlife or the Environmental Police. The Environmental Police can be reached 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1 (800) 632-8075.

## IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING PROBLEMS WITH MOOSE OR HAVE QUESTIONS, VISIT [MASS.GOV/MASSWILDLIFE](http://MASS.GOV/MASSWILDLIFE) OR CONTACT YOUR NEAREST MASSWILDLIFE OFFICE:

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607  
Connecticut Valley Wildlife District, Belchertown: (413) 323-7632  
Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145  
Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406  
Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646  
Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

Photos courtesy of MassWildlife/Bill Byrne