

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S.

In Maine, Moose Are Being Killed in Effort to Save Them

With the iconic animals beset by tens of thousands of blood-sucking ticks, the state has put its faith in a controversial plan to cull the herd.



By Julie Wernau | Photographs by Ashley L. Conti for The Wall Street Journal

ROCKWOOD, Maine—Twenty miles from the nearest paved road, Lee Kantar was deep in the woods last week to investigate a killing—one he had helped arrange. As his pickup bounced along a rutted logging road, the bearded biologist watched for carrion-craving ravens, tire tracks or other clues that might lead him to the pile of guts left over after a hunter field-dresses a freshly killed moose.

“When someone drags a 500-pound moose out of the woods, there’s evidence,” he said. A hunter had told him she had killed a moose in the area, he said, and he was eager to examine its discarded organs to see what they might say about the health of moose in the area.

Maine's moose biologist, Mr. Kantar has one job: protect the state's moose. Yet strange as it seems, he and others in the small universe of moose biologists now agree that the best way to do that is to let hunters kill more of the animals.

Fewer moose, they believe, will rein in the state's burgeoning tick population to prevent what has become a common phenomenon in moose country: death by thousands of ticks.

To test that hypothesis, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife issued more hunting permits this fall for half of a single 2,000-acre parcel of land among the many parcels in the state where moose hunting is permitted. Mr. Kantar said he and his research team plan to compare the health of moose inside and outside the test area.

Overall, Maine issued 4,030 moose-hunting permits this autumn, up from 3,135 in 2020. The state's moose population stands at about 65,000, a number that's risen in recent years, in part because of logging that extended the range of animals that prefer areas of forest regrowth. Mr. Kantar said a smaller population will help starve baby ticks, known as larvae, so that the extreme infestations become less of a problem in coming years.

"Our hope with this hunt is that it will mean we have much healthier moose going forward," said Nick Fortin, deer and moose project leader at Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department; the state has its own tick problem. "The ones that do die won't die by having a gruesome death by having the blood sucked out of them."

The moose's plight stems in part from climate change, according to the researchers: Shorter, warmer winters have extended ticks' lives, giving them more time to latch on to their shaggy hosts. And then there's the tendency of moose to return to the same areas in the woods each mating season. In these spots, flush with the leaves and twigs that moose munch on, they encounter larvae hatched from eggs laid the previous season.

One moose can pick up thousands of pinhead-sized larvae each time it brushes against tick-filled foliage. "They crawl up on shrubs waiting for an organism to walk by and can sense the moose because of the carbon dioxide the animal emits," Mr. Kantar said of the baby ticks. "The ticks open their appendages and hang on like a barrel of monkeys."

Within months, the moose might have up to 90,000 ticks, with many engorged to the size of a grape. "Any animal that grooms itself reasonably well—anything other than a moose—will knock those things off," said Mr. Fortin. "But moose are terrible groomers."

Mainers said they were dismayed by the sight of emaciated, hairless "ghost moose," some of which are so weakened that they succumb to other parasites, including brain worms

that make them walk in circles. And given the symbolic and economic value of moose in a state that has more of the animals than the rest of the continental U.S., ghost moose may threaten the state's finances.

"Moose are an essential part of rural Maine's economy, injecting critical dollars into a variety of small, locally owned businesses that rely on Maine's natural resources as a way of life," said Judy Camuso, commissioner of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Wildlife watching and hunting, she said, contribute \$1 billion annually to state coffers.

Yet some have taken aim at the state's plan to protect the moose.

"Shooting moose to 'protect' them from ticks so that these magnificent animals can be hunted later for 'sport' is out of touch with most people's values today," said Ingrid Newkirk, president of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Pauline Kamath, an assistant professor of animal health at the University of Maine, said she supported the plan but understands the criticism. "From a public point of view, it can be difficult to comprehend," she said. "You're killing these moose to save them?"

Mr. Kantar pushes back. "I'm not a heartless person," he said. "I absolutely love moose."

Some have asked why hunters can't give up their real guns and shoot moose with pesticide-filled paint guns. Others have suggested capturing the animals and removing the ticks. Mr. Kantar said his team once tried that. "We only got two moose," he said. "We're never doing that again."

Mr. Kantar's field work involves tracking moose by truck and helicopter and visiting the check stations where hunters bring their kills to show they are in compliance with hunting regulations and to deliver the moose body parts that Mr. Kantar asks the hunters to bring in.

Ovaries are especially useful, Mr. Kantar said, because they can show whether a moose cow was healthy enough to sustain a pregnancy. Cows that used to give birth annually now routinely lose their pregnancies in the third trimester as a result of tick-related blood loss, according to Peter Pekins, a retired wildlife biologist who has spent his career studying moose.

When hunters fail to bring the body parts, Mr. Kantar said, he often heads out in his truck to retrieve them—as he did last week without success. After searching for more than an hour for the pile of guts, he turned around and headed to a check station, where pickups

laden with bloody moose were lining up.

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