

## Wake-up Call at Chimney Pond

Jean Hoekwater

A light breeze lifted leaves of mountain-ash and heart-leaved birch still in the dark shadow of Katahdin while morning bird songs mingled with sounds of water running from a thousand clefts and ravines overhead. Sunlight glanced off the massive vertical slabs of granite towering over the sleepy campground based on the shore of Chimney Pond. Muffled conversations of campers in lean-tos and breathless exclamations of the morning's fresh crop of hikers arriving from Roaring Brook trailhead were amplified in the still clear air. All these routine morning sounds drifted through the screen door on the porch of the ranger office where my husband, John, and I talked over the day's chores while finishing up breakfast dishes. The doors to the ranger office and porch were kept wide open so we could respond to hiker questions as they signed the hiking roster on the porch.

"Watch out!" "Get out of the way!" "They're charging!" "Hurry, run!!" One moment, all was peaceful, the next moment, the South Basin reverberated with frightened shouts, the sound of hiking boots running very fast and metal cooking pots and utensils scattered against rock.

We were unsure where the panic originated, but then John nodded toward the bunkhouse. At least three hikers appeared, running down the trail toward us. They looked over their shoulders then, almost in unison, jumped wildly into the dense bushes lining both sides of the trail. Appearing next, a yearling bull cleared the knoll where the hikers had been, racing by the office porch faster than could be believed, given the boulder-strewn trail. Finally, almost immediately behind him and a furious sight to behold, the resident cow moose appeared. Even to the uninitiated, she looked to be blazing angry and paid no heed to any of the shocked hikers scattered up and down the length of the trail. Together, cow and yearling, mother and last year's offspring, raced full speed ahead straight down the slope to the shore of Chimney Pond. The yearling's fear was genuine. He glanced back only a brief second at his formerly nurturing and placid dam, before galloping headlong with a frantic splash into the small pond, making for the far shore as fast as he could. The cow did not hesitate in her pursuit. She plowed right into the pond behind him and hauled herself up on the shore just as the yearling was shaking off. She summarily stomped up to him, her ears flattened, mane bristling, and began delivering heavy blows with her front hooves. We watched amazed, from the far shore. We could hear and see the impact of her front hooves as she pummeled the yearling's body. Then she quit, just as suddenly as all the aggression had commenced. The yearling limped slowly off into the tall grasses and sedges growing on the delta on that side of the pond, presumably to recuperate and nurse his wounds. He was the picture of complete and utter dejection. The cow swam directly back to our side of the pond, emerged calmly and placidly strolled past the hushed bystanders who quickly parted ways and gave her generous berth. She strode purposefully up the trail to the back of the campground where her twin calves were anxiously milling about, ready to nurse.

The small knot of very subdued humans on the shore of the pond searched in vain for one last glimpse of the yearling, hidden in the tall grasses, before before turning and heading back to their campsites or whatever agenda they had before all the commotion. When we returned to the campground office, several hikers and campers approached us with some serious concerns. Why hadn't anyone seen posters or been warned about an aggressive cow moose at Chimney Pond? Before discussing the incident, we first confirmed that no one had been hurt by the running moose or their own quickly executed evasion tactics. Then we pointed out that all moose in Baxter State Park are wild animals and as such are unpredictable. Moose and other wild animals are protected throughout the Park, even in the portions where hunting is

allowed, and a high value is placed on their living lives free of interference.\*

When a cow moose drops her calf or calves in late spring, she protects them and nurses them to an average weight of about 300 pounds before they meet their first Maine winter head on. The cow and the current year's calf or calves typically winter together, while she continues to guide and protect the juveniles long after the nursing phase is past. But by mid-late May, yearlings receive a rude surprise. The cow drives away the yearling so her energy can be devoted to the calf about to be born. Which brings us back to this incident; in the rough and tumble terrain of Chimney Pond, moose will often use trails for the same reasons we do, for convenience of travel and access to the pond. In this case, the trail through the campground provided the path of least resistance and a wildlife drama we would not normally witness.

The yearling had been seen wandering as far downslope as Roaring Brook earlier that spring but eventually made such a pest of himself at Sandy Stream Pond just north of Roaring Brook that resident moose there chased him away. He had just re-appeared around his birthplace near Chimney Pond earlier this same week. We had never witnessed such a clear demonstration of maternal rejection as this, but all the pieces fit together when we realized the yearling had returned to the campground after this year's twins had arrived. As we explained all this, visitors began to realize this event wasn't about them, it was just their luck to be in the trail carrying their pots of cooking water or standing in the trail to get the perfect photo of the headwall at exactly the same moment the cow moose decided to make her maternal separation from the yearling emphatically clear. For all of us, it was a reminder of the astounding speed with which moose can move in rough terrain and the terrible ferocity of the front hooves of an enraged moose. We ended our discussion summarizing important times to give moose the space due a wild animal, no matter how seemingly docile they might appear. These times include calving time, throughout the summer when the calves are young and during the rutting season in the fall and . . . well, the rest of the time too!

Along with wonderful views of these majestic animals, if you live long enough in close proximity to moose, you may also experience indignity or discomfort. It may be a brief and humbling moment, tinged with fear for your life or possibly a very long and humiliating afternoon, maybe longer. Perhaps you will find yourself taking a long soggy bushwhack in deference to a red-eyed bull moose bedded down in the middle of a remote trail. Maybe you will find yourself chuckling nervously, trapped inside an outhouse waiting for the cow moose leaning against the door to leave. Or you could find yourself chased up the back side of a lean-to roof at a full run in front of a gaggle of campers, when only moments before you were quietly going about morning campground chores. It's hard to predict what might happen other than to say, despite best intentions, good moose neighbors know there is no reasoning with a moose, sometimes only humility and distance will suffice.

Our privileged encounters with these impressively large and ungainly creatures often manage to make us laugh out loud and remind us to keep perspective. It is sometimes hard for Baxter visitors to fully absorb the reality of a place where people sometimes need to modify their activities to accommodate the primacy of other species. Sometimes nature gives us an assist with the lesson, whether we ask for it or not.

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*\* Throughout Baxter State Park, priority is given to protecting the resource first and foremost while human recreation is a secondary priority, permitted always within the context of protecting natural resources first, according to the mission provided by the park donor, Percival Baxter.*