

They Say There Are Moose

By Margie Patlak

They say there are moose in these woods. I've never seen a moose, although I've seen their tracks. That's because they are so good at camouflaging themselves, says Rosemary, my friend who runs an art gallery in Corea. Despite their big obtrusive antlers and bodies so large they look like they just walked in from the Pleistocene, the moose blend in to the background, and you don't even know they are there.

I've seen lots of other wildlife the past two summers we've been up in Maine. Fox cross my path often, flashing their auburn tails as they leap across the road. Porcupines amble slowly in my yard, their impish pitch-black faces lined with white-tipped quills. Nuthatches, woodpeckers and warblers fill the trees, while bald eagles, black-bellied plovers, loons, and eiders come to the bay.

But no moose. How can something so big be so hard to find?

It is hot in Maine today and the incongruity of Maine being hot makes the searing temperatures all the more surreal. Normally we're blessed with perfect summer temperatures that vary between the upper 70s and the low 80s this far north. Such comfortable conditions explain why, in the days before air conditioning, East coasters who could afford it migrated up to Maine in the summer. There's even an old established colony of Philadelphians on a portion of our Schoodic peninsula that the locals call "Philadelphia-on-the-Rocks."

But today it is so hot that it has silenced the seagulls, who normally continually squawk their existence, and the red squirrels don't even have the energy to scold. The bay can't muster up a breeze, and lies stagnant in the unusual 90-degree heat. It is so hot I can't move, can't think, can't work. Just

biding my time until high tide when I can easily wade into the water with its blessedly frigid Labrador current that quickly erases any memory of warmth.

But for now, surrounded by the unusually silent forest and bay, there is an emptiness that is accentuated by being alone at the house, my husband and daughter having left the day before for Philadelphia.

Where have all the wildlife gone? Even the porcupine, which often can be spotted in warmer weather lounging in the high branches of the birch tree, its arms dangling down languidly, has disappeared. But where to? How do they cool off — the porcupine, the deer, the hummingbirds that work so hard to stay aloft, the moose with its shaggy coat that must be unbearably hot in this heat? Where are they?

I feel like the last living soul left on a seared planet.

I try to work, but the heat slows down my brain and counters my normally compulsive impulses to be productive. I keep waiting for high tide to water my empty, parched bay. The heat has blackened the amber rockweed and kelp, caked the mud with a grey pallor, and dulled down and aged the normally spring-green reeds.

I can feel myself wilt.

Finally, when two sandpipers tenaciously cling to the last remaining rock in the bay above water, I fling off my clothes and slip into my swimsuit. I carefully and slowly walk over seaweed and rock, each step taking me deeper into the icy water and causing me to gasp. But once I take the plunge and submerge my overheated head in the bay, I come alive again. Every skin cell tingles as it awakens, and there's this exhilarating relief as my overheated body gets cooled by the 60-degree water and I become one with a more benevolent Mother

Nature.

A surge of energy propels me to swim to my neighbor's cabin and back. Then I float effortlessly in the salt water, welcoming the sun's rays I had rejected previously. I sense my thoughts drifting away with the water, my discomforts and concerns no longer important as I merge with the ever-replenishing tide.

Refreshed, I head to the shower. Even though I don't bother to turn on any hot water, the cold splash feels warm, as I wash off the salt. The air is still deadly quiet, and the heat still weighty as I have dinner and watch the hazy sky ripen into warm tones. It is still hot later when the stars speckle the sky with their milky dust, and the forest and bay seem eerily empty.

I strip down to nothing and slip into bed with just a sheet to cover me, instead of the usual quilt. I am about to drift into slumber, when I hear a tremendous splashing in the water, followed by loud snorting. The snort was louder than that of a deer, and the splash was certainly bigger than something that could come from waterfowl. Bear are here, but they don't snort, nor would coyote or fox, and a bobcat would never get into the water. I'm too tired to investigate and start to wind down again when suddenly I realize what I've just heard.

A moose.

Still unseen, but heard at last. As I slip deeper into that hazy zone between wakefulness and sleep, where all self-consciousness disappears, I feel the comfort of sharing the same patch of saltwater with the elusive moose. She, like me, just needed to cool off, and will probably soon be sleeping nearby.

Maybe someday I'll meet her.

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Commentary