

# MONSTER MOOSE OF KAMCHATKA

IN PURSUIT OF A MAGNIFICENT  
BULL MOOSE IN THE WILDERNESS  
OF FAR EASTERN RUSSIA.

I clung to the sledge with one hand as it flew through the forest, pulled along by a snowmobile being driven at a good clip. Every muscle in my body was focused on remaining on the seat and keeping the heavy toboggan from tipping over as I ducked under branches and tried to avoid tree trunks. My other hand held a Blaser .375 in a death grip.

We had found the tracks of a Kamchatka bull moose and, for hours, we had followed his large cloven footprints in the snow through woods, up and down hills, across valleys and over streams. At times it was slow going in the difficult terrain, so the moose had maintained his lead and we had not caught a glimpse of him. At other times we travelled faster, but even though we passed places where the bull had obviously paused to graze, still we struggled to catch up. It was exhilarating and excruciating in equal measure. Much of the time my chauffeur, Stas, had only one foot and one hand on the machine—the rest of his body leaning far out to haul it through trees and around obstacles in the thick forest. I was lashed in the face by branches, my shoulder thumped into a tree trunk and I almost lost my grip on the gun. It didn't help that my goggles had fogged up and the condensation froze so I couldn't see a thing or clear them. Stas would crouch as he drove under an obstacle and I would plow straight into it. I was certain that my head would be knocked off my shoulders before the day was over.

At long last we spotted the moose among the trees far ahead, so we left the snowmobile and sledge and set off on foot. With every step I sank almost three feet into the snow. Finally I had a clear shot and rested the rifle on a fork of a silver birch tree. At that exact moment, a capercaillie took to the air with a clatter, and my quarry spooked.

The sight of an adult bull moose, up close, head held high, great legs stretched out in an easy trot that devours the

STORY AND  
PHOTOS BY  
CATHERINE PERCY

miles in no time, is wondrous to behold, I was captivated. I had come halfway around the planet to hunt a moose, but it was not the only reason for my visit: I have been fascinated by Kamchatka since I was young, thanks to a board game called Risk, which I played with my family. In the game, Kamchatka is a great strategic position in relation to the rest of the world; from there you are well placed to conquer Europe and Asia as well as being able to jump your army over to America.

The reality, though, is that there is no easy way to get anywhere once you have been deposited in the wilds of this huge region. You must accept that you almost certainly will not leave when you planned to, whether due to bad flying conditions, rescue missions, or some oligarch commandeering your helicopter. And there is no possibility of driving out through the mountains in such deep snow. That isolation, along with the smoking volcanoes and vast wildness of this region, made me feel extremely far away from the rest of the world during my time there.

It had taken four extraordinary days of travel—in planes, cars, and a helicopter—to get to this hunting area halfway up the Kamchatka Peninsula. The first night, spent in a Vladivostok hotel/casino, was a particular eye-opener

for a country bumpkin from the Scottish Borders. In tweed and Ugg boots, I was a bulldog among borzoi, surrounded by glamorous women wearing long fur coats and more makeup than Kim Kardashian. Glued to the side of each of them was a squat man with a face like a potato.

It's unlikely these borzoi would have been impressed by my living conditions over the next two weeks: a tiny old cabin belonging to my guide, Stas, who is also a sable trapper. It had no bathroom except a long-drop some two hundred yards through the snow from the cabin, and no washing facilities. I did not even wash my face for two weeks. But with a high temperature of  $-8$  degrees F (and  $-30$  degrees F at night) I don't believe one bead of sweat left a single pore, and I don't think I smelled too bad.

The hunting itself was a curious mixture of boredom and excitement. Every day, I'd spend hours on a sledge, being towed behind a snowmobile that seemed to be driving around aimlessly. Knowing only five words in Russian, I had no idea what was happening and no input into the hunt, which made it difficult to feel connected to the proceedings. The biggest decision I had to make was whether or not to tuck my nose into the balaclava; left outside, it froze and got hit by hard lumps of ice thrown up by the snowmobile

tracks, and additionally, the exhaust fumes quickly made me feel nauseous. If I tucked it in, my goggles fogged up and the condensation froze on them, making it impossible to wipe them off or see through them.

And then, some days we would find the fresh tracks we were searching for and the guides' demeanors would change. They would do a mime to convey to me which animal had left the prints in the snow (rather unnecessarily as it was usually blindingly obvious) and I would be swept up in their excitement. They would drive off again, with me bouncing around in the sledge, trying to prevent the thing from tipping over, while at the same time preparing myself for a stalk through deep snow and a potentially challenging shot. Wearing so many layers of clothes, gloves, hats, goggles, and huge insulated boots, was not conducive to agility and speed.

One day we followed the tracks of a large bear for an exciting couple of hours until he was able to cross a river. We were unlucky in the fact that, this winter, the many rivers in the area had been slow to freeze over, so it was easy for animals to evade us. I spent hours watching in awe as, using only an axe, hammer, and nails, the guides built bridges of birch branches to get the snowmobile and sledge across waterways.

After some years in which moose hunting was banned on the Kamchatka Peninsula due to declining numbers, the population has increased, as has their average size. Still, they are not easy to find. During our visit, some were hiding out on a large island of marshy ground covered in dense willow and it was almost impossible for snowmobiles to cross the myriad unfrozen rivers and streams surrounding the island. But the water was becoming slushier every day and the ice was steadily expanding; given that moose dislike walking on ice, it stood to reason that they would probably soon leave this fortress.

Eventually one of them did, and this was the moose we had been following, the one that had been spooked by the capercaillie just before I could shoot. After driving for some time we spotted him again, not far away to our right, feeding calmly. He had not seen us, and I was able to roll off the sledge, drop into a crouch, and move forward, closing the distance. Despite the deep snow and my layers of clothing, I pushed the safety off, put the sights on his shoulder, and pulled the trigger in one surprisingly graceful movement. The moose dropped like a rock, dead. Adrenaline coursed through my system and my whole body was trembling from the exertion and excitement—I tried to roll a cigarette, but my shaking hands spilled all the tobacco in the snow.



*Catherine Percy with her world-record Chukotka moose.*



*The hunters flew into the remote Kamchatka camp by helicopter.*

I was on a high for the rest of the day from the exhilaration and challenge. We had found the fresh tracks of a wild animal in the wilderness and followed him without causing him any stress, and he had died in an instant with no suffering whatsoever. I felt satisfaction that I had endured the difficult business, and at the critical moment had been quick and accurate.

Later, over a meal of moose, my overblown opinion of myself was some-

what deflated when Stas downplayed the experience, making out that it was just a standard Tuesday morning outing. But, by that stage, I was halfway through a bottle of whiskey, so I didn't dwell on it. And the following day I learned that he had as heinous a hangover as I did. It was notable, given that he and his coworkers had not touched any alcohol in all our time there, and seemed to be evidence that he had found our hunt intense as well.

We ate moose almost every day, but it was impossible to get bored with it; it has a delicious flavor somewhere between beef and venison, and the cook prepared it in a different way each meal, a great feat on the tiny stove. The liver was particularly good, served with nothing but soy sauce, and so big that it fed ten of us. I was less keen on the tongue.

Russia is an overwhelmingly foreign place for Western visitors in language and culture, and I thank Bob Kern and our translator, Oleg, from The Hunting Consortium, for the quality of the trip. We had four frustrating days at the end when the helicopter couldn't get in to pick us up, but otherwise everything went smoothly. Oleg was wonderful company and invaluable in communication with Stas and the other guides, whether about our hunting or in small talk around the dinner table.

On the way home I spent a night in a Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky hotel and met a group of American hunters. They were disappointed by their own experiences. Some had not seen a moose at all; some saw only a couple of average-size bulls. They felt that their budget-priced outfitter had sent them to hunting blocks that had been over-hunted. One man was especially furious that he hadn't shot a big moose. He seemed to have no appreciation for the natural world he had been immersed in, nor the rich experience of this unusual place and its special people. All the men seemed irritated when they heard that I had shot a huge animal, but this man was the most upset. He talked of his many trophies and informed me that



Snowmobiles with trailers were the only form of transportation in and around moose country.



The guides were experts at constructing handmade bridges to get the snowmobiles across streams.



The author relaxing on her bunk at camp.

# Kamchatka Bear & Moose



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hunting would never again be enjoyable because I would never kill anything as big. He looked confused when I said that I would have been happier only if my moose had been older. A bull's antlers begin to shrink when he is past his prime, so the trophy is

less impressive, but it's better to remove the ancient, non-breeding males, giving the old animal a quicker death than he might expect at the hands of wolves or deteriorating health, and allowing younger, more virile bulls to mate.

Whatever the size of the antlers hanging above my fireplace, however, the reason for taking and treasuring them is to recall the entire magnificent adventure, as well as to remember what the bull was like when he was alive—his noble, doleful face, mountainous backside, the lump of ice on his left antler. Besides, who knows if the man I met at the hotel could have shot the moose had he been in my boots—after all, I would never have been able to make the stalk and shot if I had been cumbersome. And, of course, if Stas had not been a fine driver and a deft guide to the Kamchatka wilderness. 📍

*Editor's note: Catherine Percy's moose was recently certified as the new world record Chukotka moose, with a score of 687 and a 76-inch spread. It is the largest ever taken in Russia and the third largest ever taken in the world. For information on this hunt, visit the Hunting Consortium at [huntcon.com](http://huntcon.com).*



Moose camp in the wilds of eastern Russia.



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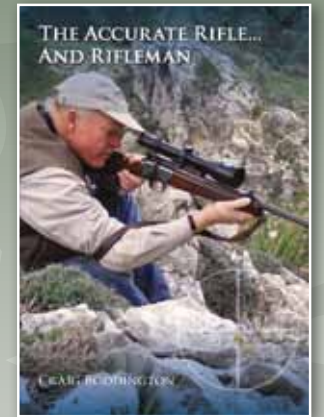
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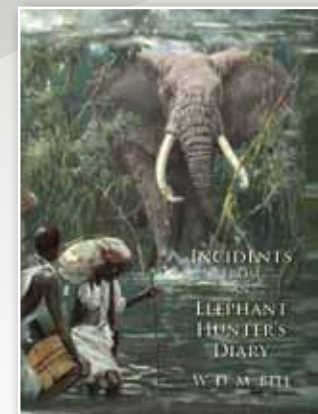
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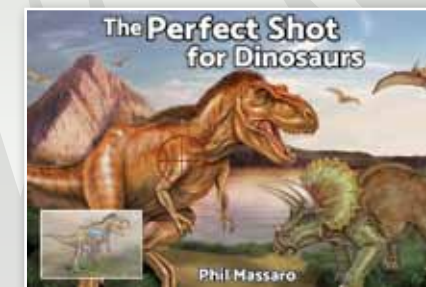
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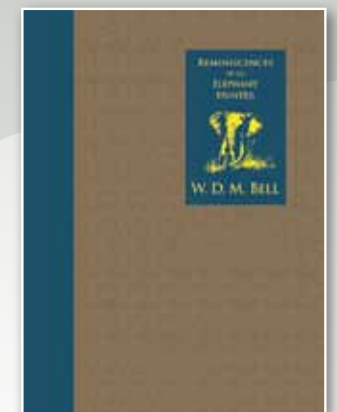
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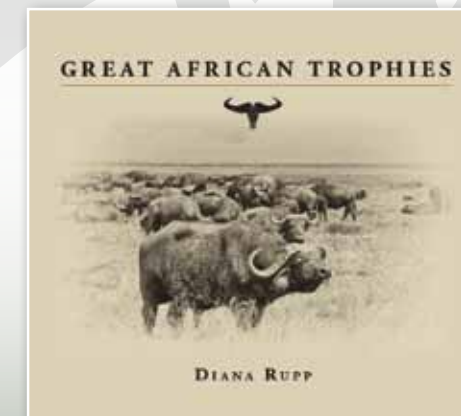
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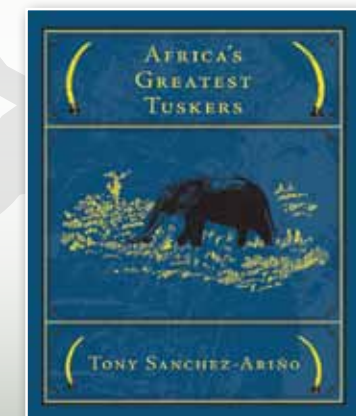
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