

SUMMER 2023  
NEWSLETTER



## Meet the Moose!

by Karin Teague

If you spent any time up Independence Pass this winter, or have been to North Star Nature Preserve or the Difficult Campground area this summer, it's a fair bet you've seen a moose or at least signs of one. Moose are the largest member of the deer family in the world, and the tallest mammal in North America. Over the past several years, up to a dozen moose have raised babies and made the area east of Aspen their home.

### Where did they come from? (hint: not Colorado)

Stories of a solitary moose wandering our area date back to the 1970s. Only recently, however, have they become regulars. Written records since the 1850s indicate that while moose occasionally wandered into Colorado from Wyoming, they never established stable breeding populations here. In 1978, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (now CPW), seeing a prime opportunity to bring more wildlife, and more hunting dol-

lars, into the state, began introducing moose into northern Colorado. Then, from 2005-07, they introduced 91 moose on Grand Mesa, the moose that, along with their offspring, are believed to have made their way to the Roaring Fork Valley.

Unlike many other states, Colorado's moose population is growing. We have ideal habitat—willow and aspen, especially, amidst large swaths of public lands—and we don't

have two of their main predators, wolves and grizzlies. And while a young moose can be taken down by a mountain lion or by a pack of coyotes, moose cows are fierce protectors of their young, as many humans have learned the hard way. All this means that moose are likely here to stay. In which case, just as we get to know our neighbors on the streets where we live, it seems fitting to get to know our ungulate neighbors, as well.

[continued inside >](#)

### A word on moose words

“Moose” is both singular and plural, unlike “goose” and “geese.” “Moose” comes from the Algonquin word “moosu,” meaning “bark or twig stripper.” Their scientific name is *Alces alces*, based on a European word for “elk.” There are four subspecies of moose in North America, with our Rocky Mountain subspecies, *Alces alces shirasi*, named after (you guessed it) an early 20th



century, white male explorer named George Shiras III. A male moose is known as a “bull,” a female a “cow,” and a baby a “calf.” When they're in groups, which is rare outside the cow-calf pairing, they're referred to as a “herd.”

## Size matters (and so does speed)

First and foremost, moose are enormous. Standing 6-feet tall at the shoulder, they weigh 1,000 pounds, give or take, with males sporting 5-foot-wide, 40-pound antlers. To support this largesse, moose eat 30-40 pounds of vegetation per day, requiring 8 hours a day of feeding.

Make no mistake, though: these gangly grazers can spring into action quickly, reaching speeds of 35mph. Indeed, a 3-day-old baby moose can run faster than you can. This is important to know, especially if you enjoy walking your dog up the Pass in winter or at Difficult in summer. While it is true that the flight response of moose is less than that of other wild animals, like elk, moose can become aggressive when they are stressed by people and especially by dogs. In Colorado, the large majority of human-moose interactions resulting in injury occur when dogs, which moose (astutely) interpret as wolves, are present. In addition, cows with calves get defensive if approached.



Bull Moose at Independence, photo Mark Fuller

## All the bells and whistles (and antlers)

Along with its long snout, a moose's most distinctive feature may be its "bell"—also known as a "dewlap"—the large flap of skin dangling below the chin, as seen in the photograph above taken at Independence ghost town. While the bell may serve a cooling function or be a scent producer, its purpose remains essentially unknown to scientists: how wonderful to have a mystery in plain sight!

There is no mystery when it comes to antlers, though. These enormous, palm-shaped, pointy-edged horns made of bone are all about mating. Bulls use their antlers to compete with other males during the fall rut and to attract females. Their success appears to be determined largely by antler size and symmetry.

But at what cost? During summer, bulls spend 25% of their energy growing antlers, up to almost an inch in a day, having shed them over the winter. Time and energy spent growing antlers, then competing for females in the fall, means less time spent feeding and fattening up for winter. But since only the fittest moose are able to devote substantial energy to antler growth—and conversely, moose in poor health are unable to grow large antlers—antlers are a reliable sign of a moose's fitness. For moose, hard winters are apparently a small price to pay for successfully mating.

## Water is life (except when frozen?)

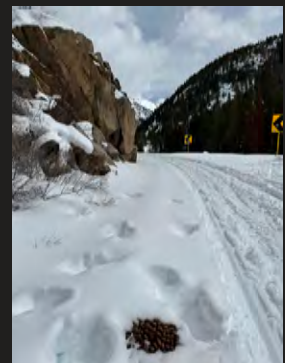
Moose spend more time in the water than any other species in the deer family. Their long, strong legs let them walk easily in shallow waters and swim in deeper waters. Water cools them. Moose expend 10% less energy when wading in water. Also, the plants you see moose digging up from the bottom of a pond are the most nutritious foods they eat.

When that water turns to ice and snow, though, everything changes. The cold is no problem for moose. Their coats are thick and their long snouts warm the air before it hits their lungs. Finding good food is the real challenge. During winter, when plants are covered in snow and deciduous leaves are absent, moose eat primarily twigs, tree bark, and evergreen needles. Not only is there less food, the food available contains just a fraction of the nutrition of summer plants.

It's also much harder to get to those food sources, especially when the snow is deep. This is why the moose hanging out between the Weller curve and the Grottos this winter spent much of their time on the snowmobile-compacted surface on Highway 82. Because of the huge amount of energy it takes to tromp through the snow in search of slim pickings, moose spend much of the winter simply resting and losing a great deal of weight. So when you see them this summer, standing knee-deep in a beaver pond grazing away, think of the trials of winter they survived, and wish them a (well-distanced) "howdy, neighbor!"

## Scatologically speaking

Most of us are familiar with the "classic" moose pellets shown here in March: about an inch long, dense and dry, uniformly shaped and colored. This is because moose are ruminants—they chew their food, regurgitate it, then chew it again, making it highly processed. What many don't know, including the author until now, is that moose scat looks different from season to season. In winter, moose's diet of tree bark, twigs, and needles are all high in fiber and difficult to digest. They also get less water. In spring, when the snow melts and more easily digestible green plants appear, moose scat loosens up and can look less like pellets and more like bear scat or cow pies.



# 2023 | Events, Outings & Projects Calendar

## EVENTS & OUTINGS

**June 15**  
Bird & Wildflower Walk with  
Mark Fuller & Karin Teague  
8am-11am

**July 10**  
Bird & Wildflower Walk with  
Rebecca Weiss & Karin Teague  
8am-1pm

**July 22**  
Watercolors & Wildflowers  
with Amy Beidleman & Karin Teague  
9am-3pm

**August 23**  
Aspen Chapel Art of the Pass show  
4pm-7pm



## PROJECTS

**June 21 | July 12 | August 9**  
Wednesday Volunteer Mornings  
9:00am-noon | meet at the winter gate

**August 5**  
Mountain Boy restoration with Wilderness Workshop  
9am-3pm

**August 19 & 20**  
Lost Man Trail overnight with RFOV  
8am-4pm



To browse and register for all our summer opportunities, go to [www.independencepass.org/2023-events-projects](http://www.independencepass.org/2023-events-projects).



## IN MEMORIUM Julia Marshall

**Julia Marshall was a true friend of IPF.**

She provided her expertise in plant selection and landscaping to help design the Alpine Garden near the Upper Lost Man trailhead and was a consultant on many other projects. Her knowledge of native plants and the high altitude environment was greatly valued and we always enjoyed collaborating with her on challenging revegetation projects. She will be sincerely missed.

— Mark Fuller



# Summer Projects 2023

1.

## Basecamp for IPF

In response to Aspen's housing and commuter crisis, IPF has stationed a trailer at Difficult Campground, allowing our Executive Director to spend more time working on the Pass and less time driving.



5.

## Human waste mitigation

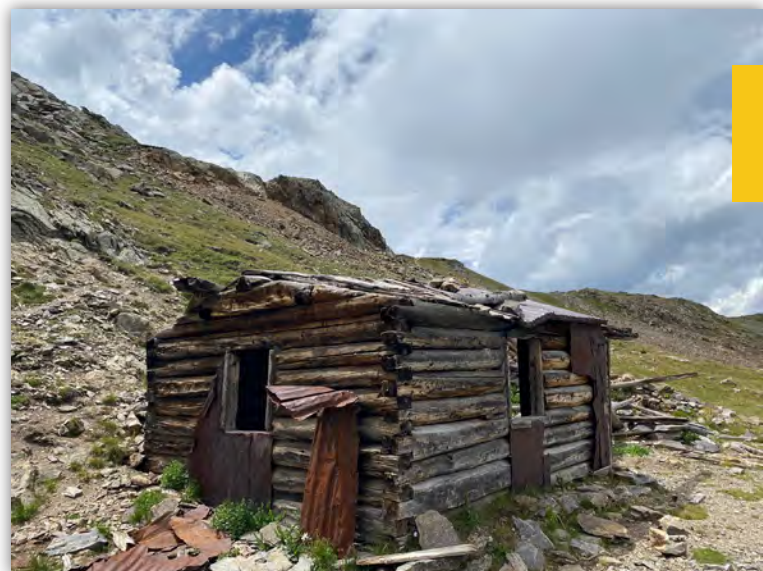
There's no nice way to put it: with more human use comes more unsavory and unhealthy human waste and toilet paper littering the Pass. IPF is continuing its efforts to mitigate this problem with restroom maintenance, improved signage, and free wag bags at popular climbing areas and trailheads.



2.

## Historic cabin preservation

IPF is working with the US Forest Service to determine whether the much-loved cabin and mine adit sited dramatically above Linkins Lake can be preserved and made safer for the public.



6.

## Bird, wildflower & watercolor walks

IPF is leading free public outings designed to enhance understanding and appreciation of the native flora and fauna of Independence Pass, with local experts Mark Fuller, Rebecca Weiss, and Amy Beidleman.



3.

## Discovery & Braille Trail improvements

Following up on last summer's successful installation of new picnic tables at this hidden gem of a place, IPF plans to replace the welcome interpretive sign at the Braille Trail entrance, which has faded to unreadable with sunlight and time.



7.

## Wilderness restoration

In partnership with Roaring Fork Valley schools, Wilderness Workshop, the US Forest Service, and local volunteers, IPF will continue its efforts to rid the Continental Divide and Mountain Boy of rebar and other metal detritus from the colossal snow fence abandoned in the 1960s.



4.

## Lost Man Loop weekend trail work

Partnering with Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers and the US Forest Service, we will spend the August 19-20 weekend improving the hard-to-reach back portions of this classic and extremely popular alpine loop trail.



8.

## Beaver, pika, and wildflower studies

IPF will continue its work and studies on behalf of the Pass's wild inhabitants, in partnership with the Colorado Pika Project, the Aspen Global Change Institute, the US Forest Service, and local ecologists.



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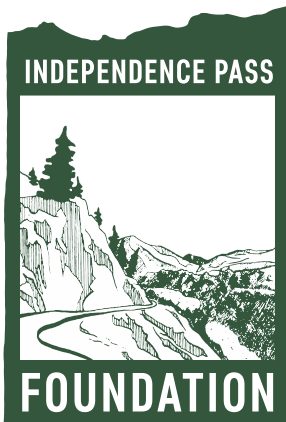
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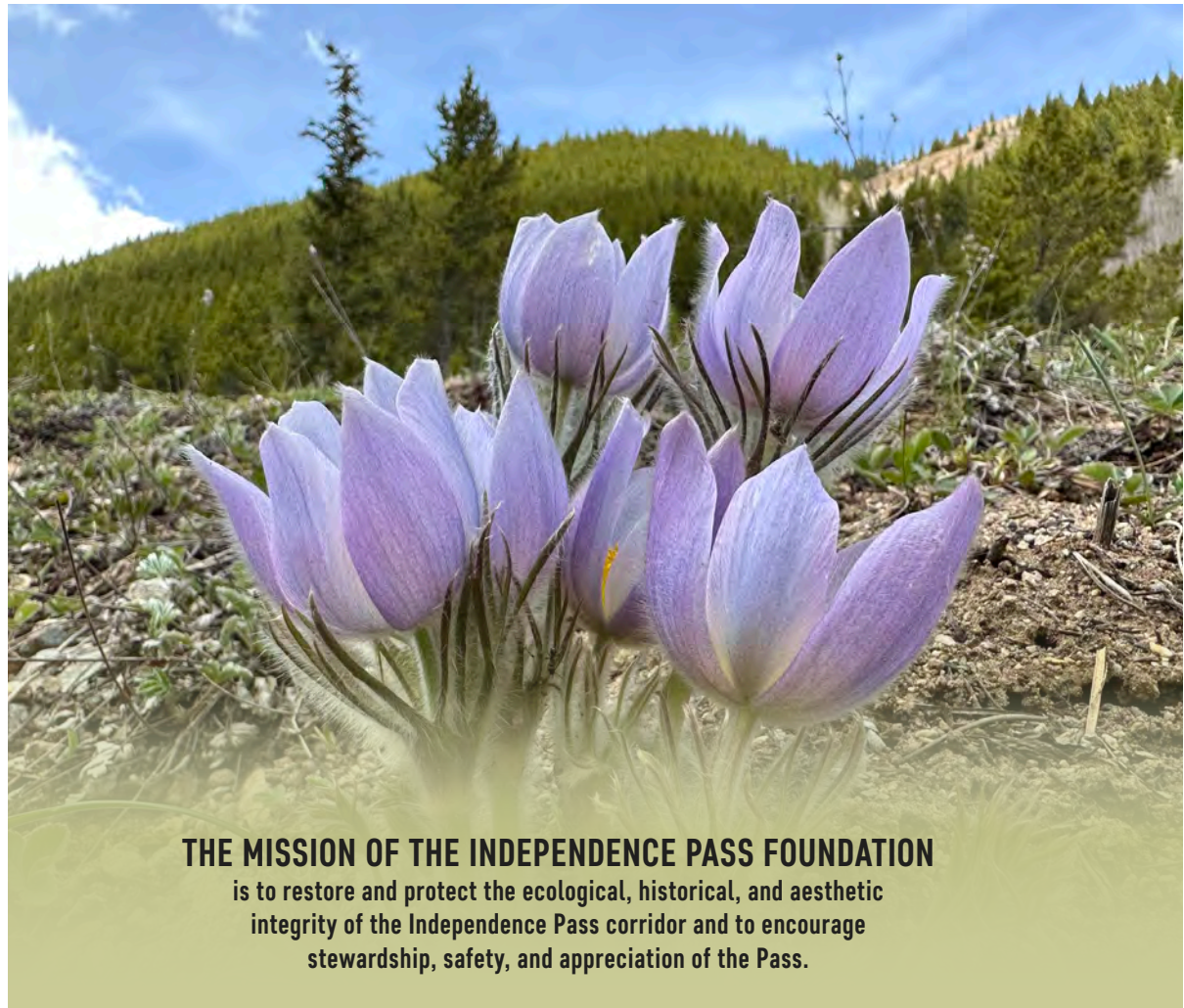
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