

Moose calls by way of Haigh's engaging prose

BY BILL ROBERTSON, FOR THE STARPHOENIX MAY 26, 2012

Once you get past the rather lame title, *Of Moose and Men* - he likely couldn't help himself - by Saskatoon professor of veterinary medicine, writer and former president of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild, Jerry Haigh, what you have is an engaging, informative, often funny, wide-ranging look at moose.

Now, being interested in moose in the first place is an important step to taking on this book, but, face it, we live in a rather moosey culture and are being increasingly inundated with the beasts, the world's largest deer. Stories abound across the country of moose/vehicle accidents with often tragic results, there are poems and songs about moose and Saskatchewan has noticed a huge resurgence in moose population, with sightings right outside the city. Haigh talks about all of this and much more.

In a style that ranges from the historical to the medical, the biological to the anecdotal, Haigh gets us started on how he got started, coming to Saskatoon from Kenya to work at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. He takes some time to establish where moose got their name (I'm betting on a Cree derivation), then gets into the science of taking down an animal with either a dart gun or a blow pipe. What? Who cares?

Well, actually, wildlife vets and biologists care a great deal about how to take down an 360-kilogram animal from a horse, a helicopter or from behind a tree to treat it for disease or fit it with a radio collar for research. This bit of information leads to one of Haigh's many comical stories. In Northern Alberta one time a radio collar went missing in a strictly enforced no-hunting zone. The wildlife people did a few flybys and got a weak signal from a farmhouse. They did a search and found the collar in the basement and the deep freeze full of moose meat. "Not the brightest star in the sky," they declared.

Haigh takes us all over the world and through the historical and archeological record to explain moose and their anatomy. He includes separate sections on sexual reproduction and the large part in that endeavour that antlers play, the environment in which they exist and indeed thrive - Newfoundland gets its own chapters here, as do parts of Scandinavia - and their relationship with other large ungulates such as red deer, wapiti and whitetailed deer.

Haigh, after all, is a doctor of veterinary medicine, so he discusses moose diseases in some detail, but never so much as to bog down the lay reader whose only interest in moose is as a curious passerby on the highway, a person who loves animals or a hunter. Indeed, Haigh himself is a hunter, has hunted so all his life, and reflects on the hunting culture around moose. He even gets into a whole section on using moose fur, or tufts, to tie his own flies for fishing. This man does it all.

He's been to a startling variety of countries to attend moose and deer conferences, keeps up a staggering correspondence with doctors and biologists in many parts of the globe, and is eagerly

prepared to go off on brief tangents from his moose mission to talk about drinking and sports in Dublin, or a big boozing party in Scotland that then leads to a talk about dancing at his son's wedding near Krakow. A dry biological treatise this is not.

Haigh even gets going on a moose milking operation in Russia and closes the book talking about taming moose and breaking them for riding. "In Finland," he relates, "the private ownership of moose was once prohibited because bandits thus mounted could escape the law with ease, leaving horses well behind."

Something I'd never thought about. Ever. But Haigh's been filing this information away for years, along with photos, maps, drawings and art reproductions. He uses the exhausted phrase "up close and personal" three too many times, but the rest of this book is a delight. Sit down, curl up and read about the amazing animal that may be grazing in your backyard right now.

OF MOOSE AND MEN By Dr. Jerry Haigh, ECW Press, \$22.95

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