



Summit County officials warn residents, visitors to keep their distance from moose

Moose are one of Colorado's most beautiful and impressive animals. Though at up to 6 feet tall, 1,200 pounds and with antlers reaching 5 feet wide, they're also one of the most dangerous.

The Breckenridge Police Department is reminding residents and visitors alike to keep a safe distance from moose after a number of close-proximity sightings in recent days.

While moose sightings even in downtown areas aren't anything new for Breckenridge or other areas in Summit County, people's willingness to approach the animals speaks to a lack of understanding on how dangerous they can be.

"This is very typical," said Colleen Goettelman, a spokesperson for the Breckenridge Police Department, on moose sightings in town. "Moose didn't just appear two weeks ago. But people are willing to get too close and take pictures, not fully understanding the consequences of something happening."

The moose population in Colorado has been on the rise since Colorado Parks and Wildlife — along with the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the National Parks Service — reintroduced the animals to the state in the late 1970s. From a few stray moose, CPW estimates the population has grown to over 2,500 statewide, and between 200 to 500 in Summit County alone.

District wildlife manager Tom Davies said that because moose are solitary animals, population estimates are much harder to make compared to herd animals like deer and elk, where flyovers and modeling can yield accurate counts. But as moose populations continue to grow, conflicts with humans are becoming more common.

"All our tourists don't know any better, and think they can get close," said Davies. "They're by far the most dangerous animals in North America, and conflicts have been on the rise statewide because the moose population is doing so well."

"People see mountain lions and bears as a threat, and they don't look at herbivores as being a dangerous thing. But moose don't fit that stereotype. They've all got a switch, when if it gets flipped they become very dangerous. They might walk off or charge you. People don't understand that they're nothing like deer and elk. They will sit there and defend themselves."

Davies said that moose are typically docile animals and won't attack unless provoked. But while most animals subscribe to a fight-or-flight response during conflicts, moose lean heavily toward fight. Because moose don't have any natural predators in Colorado — wolves and grizzly bears are their only ones — they don't have the flight characteristic, said Davies.

But moose's natural aversion toward wolves means that dogs face an increased danger when coming across the animals. Davies noted that about 95 percent of moose attacks involve dogs, the main characteristic tying attacks together.

"Moose can't tell the difference between a wolf and a dog," said Davies. "They've evolved dealing with wolves, and they know that a single wolf won't be a problem. They're willing to fight that, where a pack would be a problem. But nobody is walking around with a dozen dogs. So the moose sees the one dog and knows it can win the battle, and they go after the dog trying to protect themselves or their young."

Potential attacks against humans or pets is only one reason to keep a safe distance from moose. According to state statute, CPW is required to remove animals that have attacked and injured people from the population, meaning if someone approaches a moose to take a picture, they're putting both themselves and the animal in serious danger.

There are also legal consequences to fooling around with wildlife. Under Colorado statute it is illegal to harass any wildlife, defined by Davies as anything that alters the normal behavior of an animal. In other words, approaching a moose laying down next to a path and causing it to move may be considered harassment; a misdemeanor punishable by a \$140 fine — \$275 if a dog is involved.

To keep safe from moose attacks, Davies suggested using a "rule of thumb" theory. He said that if you see a moose, stick out your thumb as far away from your body as possible, and if your thumb can cover the moose you're at a safe distance.

If you turn a corner and find yourself too close to a moose, back away slowly, but don't turn your back on the animal because you need to be able to see if it decides to charge at you. Pinned back ears, raised hackles and licking their snouts are signs of aggression and may signal that a moose is about to attack.

If a moose charges, run away and try to put something big like a tree, car or large rock between yourself and the moose. It's also important to keep dogs on leashes when hiking in areas with moose. Earlier this year CPW [produced a video](#) warning residents about the dangers of moose attacks and showing how to avoid them.

"Distance and leashes are your friends when dealing with moose," said Davies. "And don't ever think you know what a moose is going to do. They're the most unpredictable animals I've ever worked with."

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