

Women & Language

Volume XIII
Number 1
Fall 1990

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Special Issue FEMINIST CULTURAL STUDIES

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Never Cry Bull Moose: Of Mooses and Men The Case of the Scheming Gene

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"The days are gone when females were looked at as passive objects in a landscape defined by active male protagonists." (Thomas Bass, in an interview with anthropologist/primatologist Sara Hrdy, referring to studies of animal behavior [1988: 128])

"King Kong Lives!" (anonymous movie fan).

Feminist analyses of "images of women" in the media are common; feminist analyses of "images of men" much more rare. Here I offer an *avis* more rara than either: the image of the moose, and, by refraction, the image of the man who constructs the moose in a popular magazine. As we shall see, it is a peculiarly male vision which is represented in this article, a vision which this writer adapts from the serious biological sciences.

[I]f we ask which gendered humans have historically been concerned—indeed, obsessed—to distinguish themselves from members of the other gender, the answer is 'men.' Similarly, it is men who have been preoccupied with finding the continuities between men and males in other species, and between women and females in other species. (Sandra Harding, "Androcentrism in Biology and Social Science," in *The Science Question in Feminism*, p. 100).

And it is a man who presents the moose we are about to meet.

Some investigators select an animal model that reflects their image of relationships presumed to exist in human society and then impose the language and concepts ordinarily used to describe human behavior upon their observations and interpretations of animal behaviors. (Ruth Bleier, 1984: 27).

Although it has been the custom, even among some feminists, to speak of "women's language" as a deviation from "language," this narrative about a group of animals as observed by a naturalist in the Alaska's Denali National Park highlights the deviations of "men's language" from "lan-

guage." What seem to be specifically male rhetorical devices include the use of a non-human male viewpoint character, the peculiar use of evocative imagery, the displacement of vital information from the narrative to small-print captions for the photographs, and the ordering of verbal and pictorial information in the text to create a narrative about a male hero. The author creates this narrative through slice-of-moose-life stories, conventional in texts of this kind, using point-of-male-moose-view characters.

This article on the Alaskan moose appeared in the August 1987 issue of *National Geographic*. The initial two pages show the following text over a full-color two-page photograph that foregrounds a bull moose and backgrounds, so to speak, a cow moose.

Giants of the Wilderness: Alaskan Moose
by Victor Van Ballenberghe
Photographs by Michio Hoshino (*Figure 1*)

Majestic in early morning mist, a bull moose in Alaska's Denali National Park approaches a possible mate after catching her scent. Late September and early October mark the peak of the breeding season.

This text employs an interesting strategy to make sure that no matter what we come to learn about the bull moose, we retain our image of his majestic approach, first to "his possible mate," then to possible male rivals. That strategy is to collect at the beginning of the article a series of images and the accompanying language and photographs depicting the bull moose as a kind of ungulate macho home-boy, patrolling "his" turf looking for a mate (and not, for example, being sought as one). As we shall soon see, he is a combatant against rival bulls, and he "wins" "rights" to "his" females. In accordance with this strategy, three other collections of images are pushed out of sight: (1) One set of pushed-aside images reflects the cow moose as "his female." These images occur at the beginning of the article, as domesticized counterpoints to the choreography of the majestic bull, who is the main protagonist in both narrative and illustrations. (2) A second set of obscured images reflect the cow moose as

Figure 1

Giants of the Wilderness: Alaskan Moose

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELIO HOSHINO



Photo by Michio Hoshino

combatant, hero and protector. These images occur toward the end of the text, as throw-away lines, as captions to photographs, and as photographs much smaller and more obscure than those depicting the bull moose at the start of the article. Some of these images have to be pieced together from scattered information in the article. (3) A third set of obscured images reflect the bull moose as a loser. These are buried at the end of the article, and are for the most part to be inferred only by patient, determined piecing together of scattered bits of text and illustration. This text therefore constitutes not only a multiple female subject, but a multiple male subject and in fact a multiple text. The story of the male is that of a majestic, noble padron patrolling his territory and his subjects, who quietly deteriorates through the article until he emerges at the end as a victim — of the grizzly bear and of his own nature. The story of the female is that of a quiet, responsive geisha-moose who gradually emerges as an irascible squabbler, then as an ungovernable, willful female whom the padron does not after all control, then as the moose most likely to succeed even against the grizzly that decimates the bulls. But one must read the whole text in order to discover all this information, because at the start the article purports, as we have seen, to be about the “majestic...but moose approach[ing] a possible mate after catching her scent.” The text continues with a Hemingwayesque bull-moose love/adventure story in which from the start the male is individuated; he has a story, purposeful action, individual encounters with individual other bulls. Later in the article, pages 269 on, just as we are getting closer looks at the vulnerability of the bull and the heroism of the cow, males

are further individuated through names — “Number 55” “Scarface” and “Whitey” — and case histories. Females, no matter what they do, are kept in a kind of collective background; they are “cows” or “a cow” throughout the article, no matter how noble an attentive reader may imagine they are revealing themselves to be:

At timberline on a hillside a bull moose with majestic¹ antlers strides among his dozen cows. He sniffs for chemical signs of estrus that signal readiness to breed.

Four hundred yards below, another bull approaches... Suddenly the resident bull lunges forward. The two clash antlers, each trying to push the other back... For ten minutes the bulls repeatedly brandish their antlers, thrash the bushes, and clash. Finally the intruder, pushed back, whirls and runs off. Stalking from the arena of scarred earth and broken spruce limbs, the victorious bull returns to his cows.

The winner of course takes all, all those unindividuated passive, boring cows of his, that is. We have mentioned that the text itself changes throughout the article. The primary, obvious text, presented at the beginning, is about a combative, heroic, spectacular male hero and his dominated harem of undifferentiated females. This text divides later into stories of Number 55, Scarface, and Whitey.

An alternative reading is that the text starts out to be about the male hero and ends up being about male victims dying of rut, either from wounds received in battle or because the whole rut process has left them too weak to survive.

The male subject is constructed out in the open at the start of the article. Construction of the male subject progresses from "noble" (the author's word) to a pathetic image of which the pathos is hidden by a loss of focus on the male point-of-view character established at the start and an increasing amount of verbiage, toward the end of the article, concerning female moose as mothers, and on calves, wolves, grizzlies, human hunters, and Alaskan voters.

The pictures typically show the male close up, the female far away, sometimes obscured by a foregrounded bull. At the beginning of the text, the female subject is introduced obliquely into a text about the male, by way of the "wavering moans" to which the male is attracted. The point-of-view character that introduces the text as a whole (a bull moose, to be specific) is not only the male, but, as we have seen, the male as hero, a proud victor who returns from battle to enjoy "his" females. In case any reader has missed the point, the author continues, with an ode to the male moose, a creature, it seems, of many adjectives, a veritable thesaurus on the hoof:

An awesome beast, a bull moose may weigh 1,600 pounds, stand seven feet tall at the grotesquely muscular shoulders and neck, and raise 70 pound antlers that spread seven feet — among the most impressive structures of mammals. Little wonder that "the sight of moose among the spruces" inspired in pioneer naturalist Charles Sheldon, who explored here in the early 1900's, "the consciousness of the presence of a noble form of wild life." He also experienced a primitive aura of mystery about the moose," evoking a sense of creatures of the long past." (page 264)

So the noble hero has been brought on stage, full of majesty, primitive aura, inspiration and mystery. All that remains is to investigate the noble hero's family life amidst "his" dozen cows. The words "victorious bull returns to his cows" have led us to believe that we will find a domineering macho harem-keeper and a harem full of wavering moans, emitted by cows lacking antlers and therefore nobility and therefore somehow deprived by nature, which has done it to the women again, but compensated them by giving them a bull to watch over them.

And in fact, for a while, it does look as though we are dealing with the Ungulate Marines of the Tundra. On page 266, still near the front of the article, and opposite a page-and-a-half close up of two bull moose heads locked in antler-to-antler combat (*Figure 2*) we learn that:

During my seven years of moose research in Denali National Park I have seen many spectacles of nature but few as exciting as a fight between two bull moose. Such battles determine which bulls breed. Losers not only fail to spread their genes but also may be killed outright or die slowly from their wounds.

What we have here is an episode from a mythic cycle of

stories about gene strategies, according to which genes, usually the ones possessed by males, have plans for replicating themselves through various mating patterns (gene strategy has also been invoked to explain why stepfathers sometimes kill their stepchildren and other curious human practices). Hand in hand with the Myth Cycle of the Scheming Gene, we have the corollary image of the male as free-wheeling gene-dealer, a creature driven by his scheming genes to heights of glory and depths of devastation; life to the winner vs. death in the tundra afternoon.

The story seems dramatically satisfying; it has everything — Aristotle would perhaps approve. But the story is not the meat. What doesn't emerge until later, when you read the small print of the captions and study the subplots buried near the end of the article, is that (1) the winners by and large die, too. (2) Not only the fighting, but the very growing of "majestic antlers" burdens the physiology of the bull moose, costing him both blood and strength and making him vulnerable to disease, starvation and predators. For example, four times as many bulls as cows are killed by grizzlies and other menaces. (3) what the "winners" have won is the right to hang around the cows (who are unburdened by antler growing and face-offs to the death and are steadily feeding their faces throughout all these dramas) and to chase off other bulls while (4) "The cows typically pay no attention to these aggressive displays," (Caption to above-mentioned moose combat photo), "resist being herded," and busy themselves with feeding and with fighting among themselves. And what



Figure 2

Photo by Michio Hoshino

never emerges at all unless you have caught up elsewhere with the details of moose sex life is that what he hangs around for is the right to petition each cow for about ten to fifteen seconds of intercourse once (count 'em, once) during the year. In a "group of 10 to 30" (page 266) that amounts to maybe a total of a minute and a half to five minutes of connubial delight per bull moose per year. Nor is the bull moose a macho grandee strutting around demanding his rights. As the cow begins going into heat, he is attracted by her scent to sniff around her; until she is good and ready, she ignores him except to utter a low-voiced protest and walk lazily away. He politely hangs around, then demurely tries again. When she permits, then he gets his fifteen seconds.

Jane Lancaster's comments (with respect to primates) refuting the "harem" model of animal behavior help us to bring together all the disparate details moose life provided here: "For a female, males are a resource in her environment which she may use to further the survival of herself and her offspring. If environmental conditions are such that the male role can be minimal, a one male group is likely. Only one male is necessary for a group of females if his only role is to impregnate them." (quoted by Evelyn Fox Keller, 1983: 111). On page 269, Van Ballenberghe says of a bull defeated in bull moose battle that "A week later [he] lay dead. He had gambled his reproductive future and lost." Our bull sounds like a jaunty, sporting fellow. But the fact is, the bulls do generally lose, because they are weakened by the rutting process. Whether they reproduce or not, the bulls have not gambled, they've been sacrificed. As the article reveals further on, the whole bull population, weakened by growing "some of the most impressive structures among mammals" — the antlers — and by not feeding during rut, are easily culled by grizzlies and by the harshness of winter and soon most of them die. This information is tossed in nine pages later as part of a discussion on grizzlies and numbers:

Grizzlies also affect the proportion of bulls. Our studies indicate that bulls are more vulnerable than cows, and bears kill them at high rates. Bulls in rut are less wary and in poorer physical condition. Cows feed throughout the rut; bulls do not, and lose 10 to 15 percent of their body weight. As a result, cows outnumber bulls about three to one. Cows also live about five years longer than bulls — 20 years or more, if wolves do not get them. (page 278)

And we have to wait until page 273 to learn that "a 550 pound bear is big enough to kill even the largest bull moose" (the word "even" is deceptive; apparently grizzlies are more likely to kill even the largest bull moose than to kill a cow) and to page 274 to see a moose running off a grizzly — to see a cow moose running off a grizzly, that is. She's not named or incorporated into the narrative, but only designated in the caption to a series of three photos.

Ah! If cows had been dying off at the rate described for bulls, and bulls had been protecting the cows or calves, can you imagine the rhetoric? And if the cows instead of the

bulls had proved too weak to survive their reproductive period, it is not inconceivable that the author would have claimed that the cows have become superfluous and so the herd lives on without them. No where does he state, however that the bulls are superfluous after mating and that nature (at the instigation, perhaps of scheming female genes) therefore dispenses with them.

On page 269, in a caption to a page size photo showing a bull moose hanging around at a distance from a grazing group of cows, the author finally describes the true social status of the bull:

Biding his time, a patient bull keeps watch over a herd of cows...waiting for them to come into estrus and accept his advances. Normally solitary in summer, cows band together during the rut. They rebuff premature attempts at mating, though the occasional nuzzle...is permitted. They resist being herded and move about as they please, closely followed by their attendant bull.

In other words, this guy hasn't eaten for days, and won't dine well again till spring, and he's following these ladies from restaurant to restaurant while they stuff themselves. He's waiting for his magical moment. They're going to live through the winter. Maybe he won't. And all in order to keep himself available for them, which enterprise the author calls "dominating his cows."

Yet the article does leave the reader with an impression of splendor among the mooses. It does this by the way it arranges the text. The first two pages of the article, pages 264-5, occupy themselves with description of the splendid landscape and of the encounter between the two combative bulls, which is presented as a typical hour in the life of the bull, but which, as we learn later, can happen only during that short season of the year called "rut." (At other seasons, bulls have neither antlers nor the company of cows). On page 266-267 we had the page and a half photo of close up head-to-head bull moose combat, captioned:

Head-on combat erupts during the fall rutting season as bulls vie for dominance and the right to breed with a particular group of cows. Such violent clashes follow lengthy posturing and maneuvering for position. The weaker bull usually retreats before being gored, ceding his mating rights to the victor. The cows typically pay no attention to these aggressive displays. (*Figure 2*)

Several matters are masked here. First, the word "dominance" in the second line is six lines away from the description of the cows' behavior. Over whom or what is this bull exerting "dominance," since the "cows typically pay no attention to these aggressive displays" and, in text the author cleverly reserves for two more pages, the cows "rebuff the victor until they're ready" and "resist being herded?" Do the bulls dominate each other? But they don't live in groups except in winter. At most, they repel each other. The winning bull can't be described as "dominant," therefore but

at most as “repellant.” Second, the language here and throughout the article implies that the bulls are fighting for mating rights. However the text clearly shows that the bulls have no mating rights. What the winner gets is the power to drive other bulls away from the vicinity of cows so he can be the only one hanging around as they come into estrus; he then gets to apply for permission to mate. Rights, in any event, are a human construct. Moose don’t have rights. They have power or lack of power.

Second, the discourse about noble gambling males, males’ mating rights, and males’ reproductive future is part of a larger discourse in the biological sciences about male genes having strategies to perpetuate themselves, as though genes were conspiratorial little generalitos with long range plans in their heads. This is of course a male myth based on a metaphor (“strategy”), not a scientific discovery or “fact.” The myth has been used to “explain” such diverse human phenomena as abusive stepfathers and men who fall in love with younger women. Here it is used as the basis for an explanation of bull moose combat.

So committed is the author to his noble bull and the scheming gene that we are on pages 272, 273, and 274; that is, eight, nine and ten pages into the article, before we find out what kind of fighting the cow moose do. On page 269 we learned about “the serious business of rutting...when bulls fight and court and breed.” Three pages later we find out about cows and fighting and courting and breeding.

On pages 272-3 we see a close-up, occupying the top two thirds of both pages, of a cow, ears laid back, threatening another cow with her hoofs. The other cow doesn’t look particularly impressed. (These cow moose are blasée). The caption reads:

Irritable and edgy before breeding, cows periodically lash out at each other, reacting aggressively to the social tensions of being in a group. Fights between females are brief and usually victimless. (Figure 3)

Compare page 270, early in the article, accompanying lurid close-ups of antlers coated with blood: ...these bulls spar as a warm-up to breeding battles. Remember that on page 269 we read about “the serious business of rutting...when bulls fight and court and breed.” One gets the distinct impression that bull mooses have serious business to attend to; they spar for breeding battles. Cows merely get edgy (once a year bitches?) and squabble; why, they don’t even produce victims.

But even more interesting is the contrast between the position and description of the “exciting spectacle” of bull moose combat on page 266, two pages into the article and accompanied by a large close up photo, with the following description of cow moose combat on page 274. This description is not even part of the text, but is a caption for a series of three photos, not as close-up as the two bulls,

Photo by Michio Hoshino



Figure 3

showing a grizzly, a moose cow, and a moose calf. This caption has a somewhat offhand tone to it, devoid of any rhetoric of nobility.

Storming to the rescue, a cow rushes to confront a hungry grizzly...that barreled out of the bush in pursuit of her calf as she was browsing nearby. Without her intervention the four-week-old calf would have joined grim statistics: Of a hundred calves born each spring in eastern Denali National Park, 85-90 die by autumn. Many succumb to bears, the rest to wolves or natural accidents. While a mature moose can outrun a bear or occasionally repel one with antlers, a calf has no defenses, though it can swim from birth and will take to water when in danger. Staying close to mother, preferably right underneath her, offers the best chance for survival. (Figure 4)

We notice that while bulls clash, trash and spar, the active, colorful verbs disappear when we talk about the cow protecting the calf. In fact the cow herself disappears as a subject. Not the cow, but "staying close" "offers" the calf the best chance of survival. Moreover, one is impelled to ask why, since a mature cow moose has no antlers, she isn't described as being noble and inspiring when she "storms to the rescue" against a grizzly "barreling out of the bush in pursuit of her calf." One of the factors that make it unlikely that the casual

reader will raise this question is that some of the relevant information was dropped into a different narrative on the preceding page: 550-pound bear is big enough to kill even the largest bull moose (page 273) and some more of the relevant information is not given until three pages later, on page 277:

"We have seen enough encounters to know that moose almost invariably run from bears, unlike their defensive stands against wolf packs." (page 277) So when we first encounter the cow charging the grizzly we may have forgotten that bears can kill even the largest bull mooses and we don't yet know that "moose almost invariably run from bears." It is not until page 278 that we get the rest of the information we need to see what a truly noble, inspiring, etc., feat the cow's attack on the grizzly is: Grizzlies also affect the proportion of bulls. Our studies indicate that bulls are more vulnerable than cows, and bears kill them at high rates. Bulls in rut are less wary and in poorer physical condition. Cows feed throughout the rut; bulls do not, and lose 10 to 15 percent of their body weight. As a result, cows outnumber bulls about three to one. Cows also live about five years longer than bulls, 20 years or more, if wolves do not get them.

In other words, the poor noble inspiring bull can't even protect himself, let alone anyone else. He doesn't resist grizzlies effectively; he dies. He's certainly no good to the cows and the calves. His sole contribution to the domestic

Photo by Michio Hoshino

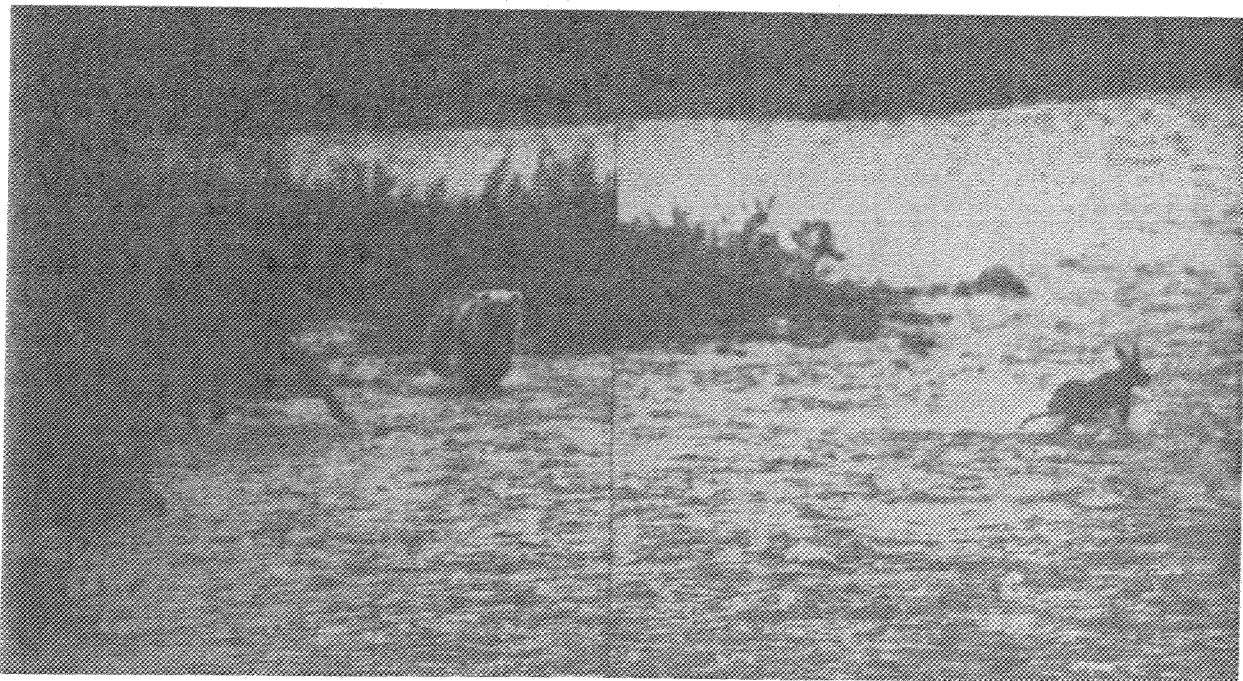


Figure 4

welfare is his fifteen seconds of stud service per cow. Yet the poor bull gets all the interesting language: awesome, majestic, impressive, brandishing, clashing, thrashing, sparring, inspiring, gambling, winning, losing, stalking, etc. The cows merely get to be irritable and edgy, to lash out, or to storm to a rescue craftily hidden in a caption ten pages into the text. Since this isn't fair, I propose to rewrite some of this drama. In my version, the story of the noble cow is told first, with all the good language, while the bull's story is edgily slipped into captions and middle paragraphs.

GIANTS OF THE WILDERNESS: ALASKAN MOOSE

Majestic in early morning mist, a cow moose in Alaska's Denali National Park browses among the spruces while a possible mate moos at her. Late September and early October mark the peak of the breeding season. At timberline on a hillside a majestic cow moose strides among her dozen fellow cows, ignoring the bull moose who loiters along a few dozen yards away at a polite distance. Four hundred yards away, a grizzly comes barreling out of the bushes. Suddenly, the cow lunges forward. The grizzly tries to dodge around her to get at the calf trotting along nearby. But the cow rushes the intruder, then brandishes her hooves. Finally the intruder, pushed back, whirls and runs off. Stalking from the arena of scarred earth and broken spruce limbs, the victorious cow returns to her fellow cows. She has gambled her reproductive future and won. She ignores the steadily weakening bull who still loiters along behind them. He hasn't eaten for days, he's irritable, edgy and weak, and he will have barely enough strength to squabble with his fellow bulls, before managing a fifteen-second stud performance and perhaps disappearing into the woods to die.

But he has done his duty, hanging around the group of cows, keeping himself available and on call despite his own needs, remaining available for mating one by one with group members as they ovulate. An awesome beast, the cow moose keeps in shape for the serious business of repelling predators by sparring with other females. Although the ferocious grizzly, the wolf, and other environmental factors take 85 to 90 percent of the calves during their first summer of life, the awesome, magnificent, noble, impressive cow manages to save the remaining 15 percent. She can fight most effectively for the calf when she keeps the calf nearby, preferably right underneath her. Unfortunately the starving bull is using his antlers and his last remaining strength to challenge other bulls to street wars, and is therefore no help at all. The cows, however, tolerate his presence on the fringe of the annually constituted female grazing group until they have all taken him in mating. When they are finished with him, they move on, and he follows along as well as hen can. Not that they care. Humans may want to note that bulls and cows do not fight with each other, and nobody forces his or her sexual attentions on anyone else. This is due to the strategy of the female's genes, which is to achieve reproduction of a polite generation of moose.

NOTES

1. Majestic antlers can kill. Who they kill is the bull that uses up his strength and nutrient resources growing them, then busies himself with antlering other bulls while the cows are busy feeding against the deprivations of winter. Then the grizzlies get the bulls and they die. Very majestic.
2. Scheming genes don't only get their owners (or lessors?) into fights; it seems that they can also be responsible for deer songs and maybe for moose bellows. The photograph at the start of this article seems to show a bull moose vocalizing at a cow moose. An (untitled) article in the May 1988 *Discover* explains that (with respect to mooses' cousins the deer) "male songs can actually stimulate the ovulation of females" (page 20). "For males the reproductive advantage in all this is considerable. The faster a stag can stimulate his harem to ovulate, the better chance he has to mate before a stronger male displaces him. In some deer groups a healthy male with a good roar could father 26 percent more offspring in a season than one who stays quiet."

The implications are staggering. Deer evolution apparently selects for roaring papas. About "harems" see my discussion of the moose. "Male reproductive advantage" here seems to consist of loudmouths edging out softer-spoken suitors so that loudmouths can mate before predators, harsh winters, and their fellow males fell them in their tracks, taking them out of the reproductive game forever.

As in the moose article, we learn the truth in the throw-away lines near the end of the article where the primary male interest is "also" supplemented by a possible female interest, attributed, unlike the rest of the information, to the opinion of the woman (a zoologist) who did the research: "[Karen] McComb thinks the female also gets something out of this: the earlier in the spring a calf is born, the better chance it has of surviving, and the greater the opportunity the female has to regain her strength and give birth again the next season." Another way of looking at the matter is that rutting male ungulates serve female reproductive advantage by eliciting early ovulation, hanging around until the females come one by one into early heat, and being available to the females (if not displaced by another male) so as to produce early, more viable offspring with a longer recovery time for the female afterward.

3. The adverbs I use here I base on my viewing of a television program on the Alaskan moose. It is difficult to see how anyone could watch the process and still imagine that the bull moose is dominating a harem. The cow's reaction to the bull is bored. Absent-minded. Ho-hum time on the tundra. Of course we know he's only got fifteen seconds per cow in him; maybe she does too.

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