Colorado Moose: A Hidden History

In 2024, associate anthropology professor William Taylor, also archaeology curator for the CU Natural History Museum, became interested in the regional archeological record of moose in Colorado, thanks to public discussions about moose management. The question at hand: Should moose be considered invasive in Rocky Mountain National Park?

Taylor sought more proof that moose arrived in the state far earlier than when wildlife officials introduced them in the late 1970s. He assembled a team that spanned the mid- and southern United States to study digitized newspapers, manuscripts, photo archives and Indigenous histories. They found evidence of a long-standing moose presence in Colorado in multiple areas.

"Studying the history and prehistory of moose tells us that they've been in Colorado for a long time, and they deserve a spot in the ecosystems of the future," he said.

Evidence

Archaeology
Moose bones found in Colorado date back thousands of years.

Historic records
Newspapers and early accounts from the past 160 years document moose before they were reintroduced to the state in the 1970s.

Indigenous knowledge
Tribal oral histories and cultural traditions describe long-standing relationships with moose.

Museum collections
Specimens have been preserved for decades.

Moose in Arapaho

Arapaho objects, symbols and designs linked to moose.

Images modified from Kroeber (1983). Illustrations by Journey LeBeau.



Moose Hide Drum

Track designs



Leg/hoof designs



Ear design



Animal (moose/wolf/elk) design



Colorado Moose Timeline

Early Holocene Epoch
Archaeological evidence dating back millennia.

Indigenous History
Oral histories, stories and songs depicting southern Rocky Mountain populations.

1800s
Dozens of documented observations.

1978
Reintroduction to the state by wildlife officials.

2026
CU Boulder-led study reframing its narrative.

2026 Study Contributors: Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, History Colorado, New Mexico State University, Northern Arapaho Tribal Historic Preservation Office, University of Alabama, University of Cincinnati, University of New Mexico, University of Utah

↓ Antlers
Males can have antlers that span up to six feet across.



Alces alces

↑ Herbivores
Moose eat plants such as willow, aspen and aquatic vegetation.

→ On the Move
Moose can run more than 35 miles per hour. They're also excellent swimmers.

↑ Megafauna
Weighing more than 1,000 pounds and standing about six feet tall, moose are the largest member of the deer family.

→ Protection
Moose use their antlers and hooves as defense from predators.

Source: National Wildlife Federation