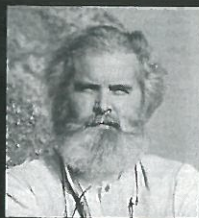


Death and Deliverance in

BY SHANE P. MAHONEY



Shane P. Mahoney is an internationally acclaimed biologist with extensive field experience in wildlife research. A brilliant and riveting public orator, his lectures focus on many aspects of conservation, including human motivations for wildlife protection, and hunting's relevance in modern times. A

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Editor's Note: This essay is excerpted from a presentation at the Safari Club International 2004 Convention in Reno, Nevada.

Fall comes to the island of Newfoundland with a stride and certainty that only the gods can muster – a raucous and rowdy suitor who knows the prize is won.

Each year in the hunter's moon, the barrens blaze red. The necks of geese rise like cobras, swaying above the morning's river of frost, and great bears loll in blueberry fields, their ebony coats blazing iridescent in a wind swept sun. The land is ripe to bursting.

A man lies with ear to the ground and stands to see the drama unfold. From the farthest horizon, the animals emerge – white against the dark blue of dawn water and sky. Even across this distance, their black faces contrast with the paleness of their figures, and the rising sun hangs like sculpted fire above their heads. Each animal chooses its own path – each as sure-footed as a stone.

For well over an hour, the two parties move diagonally towards one another, seemingly indifferent to the other's approach. In both groups, animals feed as they walk, pausing frequently to scan the country and drink the air. Alertness means long life and survival of their kind. In this season, they journey to immortality once more, for this is the time of battles and breeding, a pageant of violent death and wondrous creation.

This is the caribou rut, and for tens of thousands of years we have borne witness to its power and magic. The caribou flow through this whiteness, sometimes their bodies invisible, only the bronzed antlers of great stags loom-

ing ghostlike above the fog. I can hear them now, the clicking of their hooves and the deep guttural rumblings of the males, panting in anticipation. I can see the open space where they will emerge, and strain to find the harem masters, the one great beast in each group that will fight for supremacy, or retreat in despair.

The first animals to appear are all females, and they casually watch one another across the short distance that now separates their groups. Calves walk at their mother's side, tense. Then the young fools emerge – immature males determined to show their inadequacies. Into the arena lumber two massive brutes, each with necks swollen to frightful size, antlers thick and massively branched. They deliberately ignore one another, signalling their indifference to opposing power and presence. But each knows, as I do, that they are equally matched, and neither will turn to run. The battle has been ordained.

By now, over fifty animals are clearly in view, and there are indeed many fine stags but there is no question to whom the gauntlet falls. The groups remain separate, but by inclination now, not by distance. The first great male moves out towards his opponent. He approaches diagonally, showing the broad sweep of his muscled form, the deep profile of his thickly maned neck, and a full view of his polished antlers. He is an impressive sight. Swaggering, he approaches to within twenty feet of his opponent and stops, lowers his head to a small juniper and tears trunk and branches to threads. It is a call to arms. His opponent, in disdain, stands aloof. It will take more than this to shatter his pride.

The seconds drip like cold blood. It is time. The great opponent swings his massive form and walks directly to the challenger. He will need no display, his intentions are clear, and his confidence unassailable. Every ponderous step reeks of power. His great head sways in the cross cutting wind and 40 points of hardened antler gleam in the sun. His pace is deliberate and unflinching.

The challenger also turns and begins his final approach. In that instant, they are transformed. As though lightning has shot through their bodies, the two animals surge into one another, their great muscles bulging, their eyes



the Newfoundland Dawn

widened in fear and ferocity. Their mouths hang open, tongues exposed, swollen and enveloped in froth. Their breath is bitter and foul, their straining muscles flooding their bodies with poison. Water and mud fly as they push and stagger across the sodden ground, first one and then the other gaining advantage, each straining to break the other's neck. Their antlers clash and rattle over one another like sabres, the sharp cracking sounds shattering the morning's stillness.

The other caribou stand and watch the combatants, as does the raven floating past, head bent to one side for a better view. One of the stags slips, regains his feet, and slips again – his haunches cramping and collapsing under the fearful strain. I see his eyes, bulging now as though they would leave their sockets, the dark centers surrounded by a brilliant ring of white. I can also see the signs of fatigue, muscles quivering under his fur, and his neck being forced to one side, twisting to a frightful angle.

The contest has raged for almost seven minutes and both animals are weakening. Their sides heave like great bellows and blood runs over their faces. They stop briefly several times and rest, their great heads locked and faces touching the ground, steam pouring from their flared nostrils, blood, phlegm and mud gathering as paste around their mouths. Each animal has fallen several times, and their coats are encased in mud. Their antlers are firmly entwined, the great forces having pushed them past one another, to recurve again and lock behind their opponent's. The ground about them has been torn to pieces, clumps of moss and lichen scattered everywhere, some of it clinging to their backs and antlers. Small junipers lie crushed and broken in a wide arc, encircling the path of battle.

Once more the animals push and strain, staggering into a shallow pool, shattering the shelf ice and churning the water to a thick brown. One animal reaches firmer ground and gains the advantage, throwing the other onto its side, and sending a huge volume of water into the air. Incredibly it gains its feet, but in doing so loses position, and has its neck savagely wrenched. Weakened, it tries to disengage, but cannot. Then, incredibly, I see it being lifted into the air, its entire

great form moving over its opponent's back. For an instant, it is suspended there, pulling its opponent's neck backward to a frightful angle, literally tearing muscle and sinew apart. I am certain their necks must break, but then the antlers separate, sending one animal crashing to the ground and the other free to press the attack. It does so relentlessly, turning and launching itself into its opponent's side, repeatedly knocking it off its feet. I can hear the great ribs cracking, feel the flesh being torn and the blood spilling into thick black pools.

The battle has been won. The challenger staggers away and slowly disappears, presumably to die in some protected hollow. The victor, however, has also paid a great price, and is forced to lie down. He lays his head on the ground and rolls onto his side, clutching great ragged breaths and closing his eyes. His choice would be to stand and claim his prize, but he cannot. He is too fatigued to face the young challengers who again move furtively through the group, testing females and fate. The females however are clear in their choice and stay near him.

I want to approach the great beast, to know that I could touch him and share in his power while he still lives; but in the end, I don't. I deny myself this out of respect for his courage and admiration for his strength. In the throes of pain, his beauty is somehow even more intense, and it is difficult to take my eyes from his great form. But in the end I too turn away, and make for camp.

I am cold and my sense of exhilaration is already fading to memory. Although I try not to, I turn and look back. One falls upon the great stag and his company of does, resting in a circle about him, their whiteness glowing in the light. I can see that his breathing has ceased, and I know he will never rise again. He has witnessed his last dawn on this wild and magnificent land.

But in nature, every death is a gift to some creature, and in this instant the gift was mine. These same gifts are given to me through the hunt, where I am forced to accept my responsibility for death, and to acknowledge that without death, there is no life. I inherited a great treasure that day, a day of death and deliverance in the Newfoundland dawn.

