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Thursday May 26th 2011

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A Canadian hazard

Moose v motorist

In Newfoundland both usually lose

May 26th 2011 | OTTAWA | from the print edition

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THERE have been several cases in which well-meaning boffins have introduced a new species to overcome one problem only to create another. After Australia brought the cane toad from Hawaii to control a beetle that eats sugar cane, the amphibian spread like a plague. The import of African bees to Brazil to increase honey yields set off swarms of "killer" bees throughout the Americas. And so it is with the moose in Newfoundland.



Put them on a low-salt diet

The moose may be a Canadian icon, but in the island of Newfoundland it is an alien, introduced a century ago when local leaders reckoned their presence would attract hunters and tourists to what was a struggling British colony. Unlike in the rest of Canada, the moose has no natural predators on the island, where the native wolf went extinct. There are now around 150,000 of the lumbering giants in Newfoundland. That has drawn hunters. But the habit of the moose to wander across highways in the dark has made it a road hazard responsible for around 700 collisions a year.

A bull moose can weigh up to 550 kilos. When a car hits its long, spindly legs, that mass comes hurtling through the windscreen, killing or crushing those in the front seats. Two Newfoundlanders paralysed in collisions filed a class-action suit in January claiming the government was not doing enough to protect drivers.

The Newfoundland authorities have responded with an information campaign. This stresses that moose are unpredictable, able to swim as fast "as two men paddling a canoe" or run at 35 miles (56km) an hour. It urges motorists not to drive at night, especially between May and June when juveniles, who tend to be even dimmer than their parents, are wandering about. The government is also clearing brush from verges to make moose more visible. It will grant 5,000 extra hunting licences this year and extend the season by a week. Some locals want more fences along the highway and better lighting at intersections.

Research in neighbouring Quebec has found that putting less salt on roads makes them less attractive to moose, who make a beeline for salty roadside pools of water. But unless unlikely ways are found to make icy roads less treacherous, the risk will be that one lethal hazard is replaced by another.

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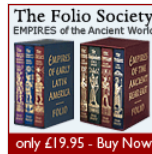
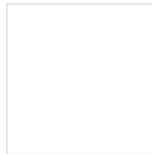
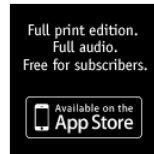
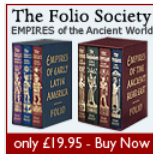
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