

STATUS

Humans are competing with moose for the least sensible path to social recognition.



ROBERT

ON A FINE September morning, a mighty bull moose is surveying his realm from a small rise in a swampy meadow. A magnificent specimen, the crowning achievement of moose evolution, he is thinking that life would be better if he were a bird.

The moose understands that these are the best of his days. A hard frost has finally killed off the biting flies. The sun is reflecting off his huge rack of newly grown antlers. Rutting season has arrived and he is ready. But in the recesses of his underestimated brain, he is convinced that he got the short end of the evolutionary stick.

The problem is what he has to go through to demonstrate superiority and achieve reproductive success. For males in the moose world, the accepted strategy for present status and future legacy has three steps, none of them much fun.

First is spending all spring and summer bulking up and growing great large antlers to impress females and win jousting contests with other males. That entails all-you-can-eat gorging to build sumo size and grow 30 kilos of extra bone for the antlers. Our moose suspects that a little less eating and a few more breaks for swims away from the biting flies would contribute more to moose well-being.

Next comes life with antlers – heavy, over a meter and a half wide, on your head, in a forest. Who thought that was a good idea?

Finally, the male moose gets to spend the fall bashing heads with his similarly encumbered brothers, until the social classes are defined and the mating arrangements are settled.

Our moose could see no sign of intelligence in the design of this strategy. On the contrary, his assigned means of achieving status appeared to be disagreeable,

inefficient and incompatible with practical demands for decent quality of life.

It was also clearly unnecessary and unfair. From his vantage point, the moose could see a great blue heron spearing frogs and a white-throated sparrow nabbing flies. Both had demonstrated their robustness and had mated well. For the heron, status achievement mostly involved waving his large and useful beak about and doing an oddly graceful little dance to impress his

had made some sense. But now it's mostly disagreeable, inefficient, unfair and incompatible with life on a planet that has declining tolerance for expanding demands.

And the strategy is unnecessary. While we may have a genetic predisposition to seek social recognition and regard, there's no evidence that we are locked into any particular way of assigning status.

Certainly we're not forced to reward the most acquisitive.

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intended. The sparrow only had to add a few creative variations to his repertoire of songs.

The birds got to sing and dance. The moose had to grow a huge unwieldy rack and bash heads with it. Maybe once, back in the evolutionary mists, a less elaborate version of that strategy had made some sense. But now he would rather be a bird.

Meanwhile in the realm of humans, mighty nations and comfortable individuals stand on small rises, wishing for bigger antlers.

They imagine themselves to be the crowning achievements of evolution. And yet no level of magnificence seems to be enough. They are convinced that status depends on becoming ever richer and more powerful, controlling and exploiting more resources, possessing more impressive and intimidating equipment.

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For most of our biological history, humans were nomadic hunters and gatherers for whom material wealth was a burden to be lugged from one place to the next. The circumstances favoured agility and adaptability, toughness, respect for the environment, sociability and memory. If these are captured in our genetic inheritance, they leave us with plenty of cultural room to give higher status to characteristics more likely to deliver a cheerful future.

Perhaps no moose will whistle a tune or practice a two-step. But on the moose's behalf as well as our own, we can stand on our small rises and build a culture that favours music and grace over antlers and headbutting. **AV**

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