

Winter Ticks



- Winter tick disease is a pattern of hair loss seen commonly in moose, due to infestation by a particular species of tick.

Species Affected in Colorado

- Moose
- Elk (less frequently)

What to Look For

- Hair loss, especially around neck and shoulders
- Adult ticks on animal's skin
- Lighter areas of exposed skin and undercoat
- Thin, debilitated animals, especially young



Moose showing hair loss from winter tick infestation.
Photo credit: Jim Jackson, CPW

Cause and Transmission

As its name implies, the winter tick (*Dermacentor albipictus*) is found parasitizing moose during the winter months (January-May) during which time ticks are mating, feeding on moose blood, and preparing to drop off the moose in the spring to lay eggs. The presence of adult ticks is irritating, and the moose attempt to remove ticks by rubbing against surfaces. The more severe the tick load, the more aggressively the moose groom themselves. Tick loads vary from year to year and young animals are often more severely affected than adults. The grooming/rubbing behavior causes hair loss along the neck and shoulders, exposing their lighter-colored skin and broken hair shafts. These lighter areas can be extensive, giving the moose a white appearance and lending the disease its name "ghost moose". Affected animals can also be quite thin, particularly when young animals are affected. This poor body condition is presumably caused by energy loss due to grooming behaviors.

Public Health Considerations

Winter ticks are not known to carry any diseases that can be passed to humans or their pets. Ticks can potentially be picked up by humans or domestic animals from the environment, but there is no evidence of significant health concerns to either. Meat from infested animals is safe to eat, as the ticks only affect the skin and hair coat of their hosts.

Additional Information/References:

White as a Ghost: Winter Ticks & Moose, by Dr. Bill Samuel

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