

Reindeer

Latin: Rangifer tarandus
German: Rentier

French: Renne
Norwegian: Reinsdyr



Photo: Peter Christensen, Visit Greenland

Antler clad herbivore of the Arctic

The reindeer, also known as caribou in North America, but generally referred to as reindeer in this guideline, is a species of deer with circumpolar distribution native to the Arctic, the Subarctic and some alpine areas. There are several sub-species of reindeer with variations in size, color and antler appearance.

Facts

Some reindeer populations are sedentary, while others are migratory. While overall widespread and numerous, some of the populations subspecies are rare and at least one has become extinct.

Reindeer are hardy, ruggedly built animals that are well adapted to life in the tundra. Their fur traps air, which not only helps provide them with excellent insulation, but also keeps them buoyant in water. The hooves' foot pads are softer in summer, when the ground is wet, providing the animals with extra traction. In the winter, the pads tighten, revealing the rim of their hooves, which is used to provide traction in the slippery snow and ice. Both sexes have antlers, and it can be difficult to distinguish male from female. Antlers are, however, typically larger on males.

Depending on the area, a variety of predators may prey on reindeer, including wolves. Polar bears sometimes, but very rarely prey on reindeer, and this is today considered of minor importance for live animals. As carrion, Arctic reindeer are fed on by e.g. polar bears, foxes and ravens. In many areas of the Arctic, blood-sucking insects, such as black flies and mosquitoes, are a plague to reindeer during the summer and can cause enough stress to inhibit feeding and calving behaviors. The Svalbard reindeer is almost exceptional in that it does not inhabit an environment where insect harassment is a problem.



Photo: Kelvin Murray

Reindeer calves are normally born in early June and suckle their mothers for three months.



Photo: Steve A. James, Quark Expeditions

The Svalbard reindeer is relatively short-legged and has a smaller shoulder height than other reindeer subspecies.



Photo: Brian Haynes, Quark Expeditions

Traditional festive legends mention Santa Claus's reindeer pulling a sleigh through the night sky to help Santa Claus deliver Christmas gifts to children.

Guidelines when encountering reindeer

Arctic reindeer are often tolerant of people. Reindeer's reaction to human presence varies depending on how we move, our speed, direction, noise, etc. Reindeer – especially young animals – are often inquisitive and curious when encountering humans – particularly when they have the wind behind them and cannot identify your smell.

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is a great experience. To avoid disturbance when close to reindeer, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

- Avoid disturbance of reindeer.
- Let the reindeer graze, rest and ruminate in peace.
- Do not follow a reindeer or a reindeer herd.
- Observe the behavior and if reindeer show signs of disturbance retreat quietly the way you came.
- Limit your time in proximity of reindeer. Disturbance means less time for foraging and extra energy expenditure.
- Mothers with calves are especially sensitive to disturbance; show extra caution.
- Never touch live or dead reindeer or other wild animals.
- Never pick up or remove body parts from a dead reindeer or other dead animals.
- If you find a reindeer that is suffering because it is sick, injured or has foreign objects attached to the antlers (e.g. reindeer with a fishing net, wire or other objects in its antlers), always report this to local authorities.

Regulations

It is a violation of Svalbard's Environmental Protection Act's general principle of protection to disturb reindeer. According to the act "All species of flora and fauna, including their eggs, nests and lairs, are protected ..." and "all access and passage in Svalbard shall take place in a way that does not harm [...] or in any other way [...] result in unnecessary disturbance of animals." (Section 25 and 73 of Act of 15 June 2001 No.79 Relating to the Protection of the Environment in Svalbard)

In other regions of the Arctic national and local regulations may include different provisions. Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.