

# Santa's All-Girl Reindeer Team?

We know one thing for sure about Santa's reindeer — they all have a full set of antlers. This can mean only one thing. Find out what, along with nine other fun facts about reindeer.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Rudolph, with his red nose, is certainly a cute little guy, but many people don't realize just how remarkable he and his reindeer pals truly are
- Unlike all other deer species, both male and female reindeer grow antlers
- Reindeers are uniquely adapted to life in frigid regions of the world
- Some migrating reindeers travel longer distances than any other migrating terrestrial mammal
- Certain populations of North American reindeer travel over 3,000 miles per year, and 23 miles per day

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published December 25, 2017.***

If merry old St. Nick came by your place last night, you may have heard the tap-tap-tapping of reindeer hooves on your roof. Since Mr. Claus tends to grab all the attention this time of year, here are some little-known facts about his tireless team of tiny reindeer.

## 10 Fascinating Facts About Reindeer

1. **A reindeer by any other name is still a reindeer** — Reindeer are caribou in some regions of the world. According to Live Science:

*"Reindeer are also called caribou, depending on their location. They are called reindeer in Europe, but in North America, reindeer refers to Eurasian populations, and caribou refers to wild populations in North America, according to the **San Diego Zoo**. Reindeer also often refers to domesticated animals, while caribou refers to wild populations."*<sup>1</sup>

Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*), of which there are 14 subspecies, belong to the Cervidae family, which includes deer, elk, moose and wapiti. All members of the Cervidae family have antlers, hooves and long legs.

2. **Antlers are not just for boys** — Reindeer are the only species of deer in which both males and females have antlers, and they grow a new set every year. A male reindeer's antlers can grow up to 51 inches long and weigh up to 33 pounds; a female's can grow up to 20 inches.

Reindeer body size varies quite a bit depending on the subspecies. Males range from 28 to 53 inches tall at the shoulder, from 5.9 to 6.8 feet long, and weigh anywhere from 143 to 529 pounds. Females are smaller at around 5.5 to 6.2 feet long, and 121 to 308 pounds.<sup>2</sup> The largest reindeer subspecies is the **Finnish forest**

**reindeer**, who measures nearly 8 feet in length, nose to tail.

These big fellas have longer legs than other subspecies, wider hooves (for forest living) and antlers that grow closer together. These physical differences help Finnish forest reindeer move through woodlands unhindered.<sup>3</sup>

3. **Santa's sleigh may be powered by an all-girl team** — Reindeer shed their antlers at different times of the year based on their sex and age. Adult males lose their antlers in November and early December, and as we know, the Christmas Eve reindeer team has a full set of headgear. This very likely means Santa Claus' reindeer are female, since they're all still antlered-up on December 24!<sup>4</sup>
4. **Reindeer are winterized** — Reindeer can be found in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, northern Europe and northern Asia in tundra, mountains and woodland habitats. Their home ranges can cover up to 200 square miles.<sup>5</sup> Reindeer are uniquely equipped to live on the frozen tundra. Their noses serve as little heaters, warming the air they breathe before it enters their lungs. The nose also condenses water in the air to keep mucous membranes moist.

The reindeer's fur coat not only traps air to keep his body insulated, it also acts as a flotation device when he enters the water. Reindeer hooves soften in warmer weather to provide good traction on wet ground. When winter arrives, the pads of the hooves tighten up to reveal the rim, which is designed to get traction on snow and ice.<sup>6</sup>

In frigid weather, reindeer lower the temperature in their legs to near freezing levels to keep their core body heat even.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the knees of some subspecies make a clicking noise while walking so members of the herd can hear one another and stay together in blizzard conditions.<sup>8</sup> Reindeer have also lost their circadian rhythm as an adaptation to their Arctic environment.<sup>9</sup>

5. **Reindeer don't like spending time alone** — Reindeer are social creatures that live in herds numbering from 10 individuals, to a few hundred, to a few hundred thousand in the spring!<sup>10</sup> They eat, sleep and travel together in herds.
6. **Baby reindeer skip the toddler stage** — Baby reindeer, called calves, are born after about 7 1/2 months of gestation, and weigh from 5 to 20 pounds depending on the subspecies. The little guys and girls stand up within an hour of being born, and within a week are eating solid food to supplement their mother's milk.

The calves are fully weaned by 6 months, and their first set of antlers makes an appearance around their second birthday. Reindeers reach maturity at 4 to 6 years of age, and their average lifespan is 15 to 18 years.<sup>11</sup>

7. **Reindeer are strict vegetarians** — Reindeer are herbivores, meaning they eat only plants, including herbs, ferns, mosses, grasses, shoots, fungi and leaves. An adult reindeer can put away from 9 to 18 pounds of vegetation a day.<sup>12</sup> Reindeer have a keen sense of smell, which comes in handy when the ground is covered in snow.

They can smell energy-packed, blood-warming lichens, called reindeer moss, even when it's buried under 2 feet of the white stuff.<sup>13</sup>

8. **Reindeer run like the wind** — Reindeer typically cover from 12 to 34 miles a day during migration and run at speeds of up to 50 miles per hour. Even day-old calves can outrun an Olympic sprinter!
9. **Reindeer populations are in decline** — Reindeer are listed as vulnerable according to the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species. This is because the species has experienced a 40% decline over the quarter century. Currently, there are around 3.5 million caribou in

North America, around 1 million wild reindeer in Eurasia and around 3 million domestic reindeer in northern Europe.<sup>14</sup>

10. **Some migrating reindeer travel incredible distances** — Not all reindeer migrate, but some that do travel longer distances than any other migrating land mammal. Certain populations of North American reindeer travel over 3,000 miles per year, and 23 miles per day.<sup>15</sup> Reindeer are strong swimmers and can cover 4 to 6 miles per hour in water. Migrating herds routinely swim across large lakes as lakes and wide rivers.<sup>16</sup>

Sources and References

<sup>1,2,5,10,11,12,14</sup> [Live Science, December 16, 2021](#)  
<sup>3,7,13</sup> [Reindeer, Ten Interesting Facts About Reindeer \(Archived\)](#),  
<sup>4,6,15</sup> [Mental Floss, November 26, 2024 \(Archived\)](#),  
<sup>8</sup> [National Wildlife Federation, December 21, 2010](#)  
<sup>9,16</sup> [Wikipedia, Reindeer](#)

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