



This caribou, or reindeer, was the first one I had ever seen in the wild. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

Tidbits and facts on Santa’s favorite helper: Reindeer

It had been raining for so long that it seemed the way it was supposed to be. I forgot what the sun looked like. Everything was wet. Trying to get rest in my sleeping bag was like lying in a busted waterbed. I got up in the morning from a soaked bed, put on wet clothes and soggy boots. If it weren’t so cold, I would probably succumb to jungle rot.

The ground was just a bog, and a dry spot was considered anything less than ankle deep. I had been on worse trips, but really could not remember when. Cloud bank after cloud bank rolled in. Visibility between banks was sometimes a hundred yards, until the next cloud bank with more rain arrived, just to improve the mood.

Then I saw him. He was the other side of the river, a ghostly gray color, never stopping, continually moving along as if we were not there watching him. He was the first reindeer I had ever seen, and I will never forget him. Seeing him, in that exotic location near the Arctic Circle, made the entire trip worthwhile.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

From then on, my mood improved.

Reindeer are also called caribou, depending on their location. They are called reindeer in Europe and all of the Eurasian locations, but here in North America, we call them caribou. And contrary to popular belief, reindeer don’t fly, but they do have a shiny red nose, sometimes.

Caribou that have been domesticated are often referred to as reindeer. Science tells us that reindeer were one of the first domesticated animals, having been first domesticated some 2,000 years ago. Many arctic communities rely on this animal for food, clothing and materials for shelter.

These animals are all part of the cervidae, or

deer family, which includes deer, elk and moose. Like all the others in their family, they come equipped with long legs, hooves and antlers that are on males and females.

There are seven recognized subspecies of caribou worldwide, and several of them that are extinct. Reindeer are found in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Northern Europe and Northern Asia. They live in cold tundra mountains and woodland habitats. From my experience, they like a lot of rain.

Reindeer are built for the cold and wet weather. Their noses warm up the air before it gets into their lungs. The entire caribou body is covered in fur, including their hooves.

They really do have a shiny red nose, and not from a night of debauchery. The caribou nose is a dense network of blood vessels, having 25% more capillaries carrying red oxygen-rich blood than humans do. The increase in blood flow in the nose will keep the nose’s surface warm. The dense network of blood vessels in reindeer noses is also essential for

regulating the animal’s internal body temperature. Like many mammals, reindeer don’t sweat, and living where they do, I can see why.

Caribou are very social animals, often found in herds. The herd size can range from a dozen animals, all the way up to a half a million. Large herds of caribou migrate more than 1,000 miles to find food in the winter.

All male caribou shed their antlers in November, but the females hang onto theirs for much longer. This raises an obvious question about the reindeer that pulled Santa’s sleigh. Since all of them had antlers on Christmas Eve for the big journey, they must have all been females.

There are probably a few other discrepancies in the reindeer and Santa story. Reindeer can’t fly, but they sure can run. Caribou in the wild can often reach 50 miles per hour when they feel the need. That is almost fast enough for a take-off down a runway, so maybe.

There are currently 3.5 million caribou in North

America, but that number has taken a real beating in recent years. Caribou are listed as vulnerable by the International Union For Conservation Of Nature (IUCN), because they have seen a 40% decline in population over the past quarter century.

There are around 1 million wild reindeer in Eurasia and 3 million domestic reindeer in Northern Europe, according to estimates. The good news is that you don’t have to travel to exotic lands to see one.

According to the Reindeer Owners and Breeders Association, based in Zeeland, Michigan, there are about 2,000 reindeer in the lower 48 states. There are 180 members of the association, and at least three ranches with reindeer located in Colorado.

One such place is the Laughing Valley Ranch, located in Idaho Springs. There, you can visit them in a petting zoo, have a sleigh ride, or take part in many Christmas related activities.

For the kids, the domestic reindeer are a great idea. They are great to

pet and see up close. The antlers are magnificent and the fur is unbelievably thick. It is a great family activity and one all will enjoy.

For me, I prefer seeing them in their native habitat, near the Arctic Circle. With Caribou, many of which have never seen a human being, to the dancing Northern Lights show (when it is not raining), it is an unbeatable experience and one that I will do again someday. Knowing that all of Santa’s reindeer are girls kind of makes me doubt his whole story, but I don’t want to be tagged as a non-believer this close to Christmas.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

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