

Things you may not know about reindeer

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Reindeer and caribou are one

Traditionally, Eurasian reindeer and American caribou have been considered two different species, but they are actually one: *Rangifer tarandus*. There are two main groups of reindeer, tundra and woodland, which are divided by habitat type, not location. The animals are divided into nine to 19 subspecies, depending on who is doing the classification.

Reindeer have many different names.

The word reindeer comes from the Old Norse word *hreindyri*, a combination of *hreinn* (the Old Norse name for the animal) and *dyr* ('deer'). Caribou is the French-Canadian version of the Mi'kmaq word *kaleboo*, meaning 'pawer' or 'scratcher', referring to the animal's habit of digging through the snow to find food.



Santa's reindeer are most likely *R. tarandus platyrhynchus*, a species in Svalbard

The poem 'A Visit from Saint Nicholas,' written by Clement C. Moore, introduced the world to Santa's reindeer and described them as 'tiny.' The only reindeer that can truly be considered tiny is the Svalbard subspecies, which weighs about half as much as most other reindeer subspecies and is at least a foot shorter. They have thicker winter fur, smaller antlers, and shorter legs than all other populations. That can come in handy when landing on rooftops.

Oddly enough, you'll almost never see these reindeer in depictions of the Santa story. Live-action films typically use full-sized reindeer, while cartoons often depict these creatures as a cross between a white-tailed deer and a reindeer.

It's not always easy to determine the sex of reindeer.

In most deer species, only males grow antlers, but that is not true for most reindeer. While females in some populations do not have antlers, many do. At some times of the year, you can still tell the sex of a reindeer by examining its antlers. That's because males shed their antlers in the winter or spring, but females shed their antlers in the summer.



Santa's reindeer could be children

Since reindeer shed their antlers at different times of the year depending on their sex and age, we know that Santa's reindeer are probably not older males, since older male reindeer shed their antlers in December and Christmas reindeer are always depicted with antlers. Female Svalbard deer start growing their antlers in the summer and keep them all year round. This means that either Santa's sleigh must be pulled by young reindeer, continually replaced as they age, or Santa's reindeer are female.

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