

# Reindeer

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**Scientific Name:** *Rangifer tarandus*

**Irish Name:** Réinfhia

Reindeer, or caribou in North America, is a species of deer that inhabits Greenland, Russia, the Scandinavian countries, Alaska and Canada. In Europe reindeer have been domesticated for approximately 3000 years and are farmed for their milk, meat and hides.

**Antlers** are one of the most important characteristics of reindeer and normally both males and females grow them. They are the only species of deer where females also have antlers. Males have longer antlers of up to 1.2 m, while the females' only reach about 0.5 m. Antlers grow from the frontal bones of the skull and have a main beam and many branches. Reindeer drop their antlers every year, re-growing them each time.



Reindeer have special **hooves** that adapt to the season. In the summer, when the ice and snow have melted and the weather is rainy, their footpads become spongy. This is useful for walking in marshy fields. In winter their hooves harden up, helping them dig into the snow and ice as they search for food. It also prevents them from slipping.

Reindeer's **nose** is specialised for the extreme cold weather: it warms up the incoming air before it enters the lungs.

Their **eyes** are also adapted to the special weather conditions: part of the eye changes its colour from gold to blue for the dark winter months, making the animal's vision more sensitive.

As reindeer mostly spend their lives in cold weather they are covered in **hair** from their nose to the bottom of their feet. Their fur varies in colour depending on the species, where they live, whether male or female and on the season. Colours range from brown, white, tan to grey and are darker in summer and lighter in winter. Reindeer

have two layers of hair: a thick and woolly undercoat with fine fur and a top layer of long, hollow guard hairs that trap the air and hold the body heat. This protects the animal against wind and cold.



Reindeer are ruminants and have a four-chambered stomach. Their diet includes lichens, grasses, sedges, leaves of willow and birch.

## Part of the Herd

Reindeer live in herds of 10 to a few hundred and they migrate towards the



south in the winter when food is hard to find. Some populations of reindeer travel the furthest of any land mammals, migrating up to 5000 km a year. Others only migrate locally. Reindeer can run as fast as 80 km/h and they normally travel between 19 -55 km a day during migration.

## Family

A male reindeer is known as a **bull**, a female is a **cow** and their young is a **calf**. Reindeers mate from September until early November and males will fight each other for females, using their antlers as weapons. Females give birth in May and June, usually to one calf but twins do occur. A reindeer's life span is between 12 and 15 year but sometimes for up to 20 years.

