

Reindeer

By Rebecca Bracken

One of my favorite Christmas movies is *The Santa Clause* starring Tim Allen. While the movie is comedic and endearing, it features some of the coolest animals around – the reindeer. As most people know, the story is that the eight reindeer (or nine if Rudolph joins!) pull Santa's sleigh around the world as he delivers presents to all the boys and girls. In reality, reindeer, also called caribou, were domesticated by humans several times over our history, and have served a greater purpose.

Human populations living in some of the coldest parts of the world depend on caribou for food, clothing, shelter, and often transportation. People in sub-Arctic cultures often hunt caribou for the meat, hides, and antlers, and use tamed caribou for milk. People living in the Siberian wilderness may own hundreds or thousands of reindeer, breeding them for their fur and meat. In some Scandinavian countries, you can buy reindeer meatballs in a can, or reindeer sausage at the grocery store. In Asia, antlers are often powdered and sold as a medicinal supplement.

While the reindeer is the only successfully domesticated deer species on a large scale around the world, there are many wild populations remaining. However, there are only thought to be two genetically pure wild populations in Europe, with semi-domesticated reindeer in other parts of the world breeding with wild populations. In North America, in the wide-open spaces of Labrador, herds of caribou migrate the farthest of any terrestrial mammal, often traveling over 3,000 miles a year. Yet there are also sedentary populations, specifically those inhabiting the boreal woodlands.

I'd love to say that I can confirm that reindeer can fly; while I can't, they can run at speeds of up to 50 mph and can travel up to 34 miles a day during migration. Newborn calves, quick on their feet soon after birth, can run faster than any Olympic sprinter by the day they are 24 hours old. During migration, small groups join together, forming large herds numbering 500,000 strong. Amazingly, reindeer are also excellent swimmers, often crossing large lakes or wide rivers during their seasonal movements.

Sadly, caribou numbers are declining across the world. The International Union for Conservation of Nature classified the species as vulnerable because global populations have declined over 40% in the last 25 years. There are three extinct subspecies of reindeer now, with at least one wild population replaced by domestic reindeer.

We also have to assume Santa's reindeer are fully domesticated, in order for them to pull his sleigh. Over the years, it also appears that Santa started with one reindeer, but according to the 1823 'Twas the Night Before Christmas poem, Santa current has eight well known reindeer traveling with him around the world.

For those of you who celebrate Christmas, take a moment to think about not only the reindeer we know and love from the many stories, but also the wild reindeer that are so important to so many around the world. Reindeer are an iconic species for many people, and have been appreciated by humans since prehistorical times. Be sure to keep an ear out for the prancing hooves on your roof this holiday season!

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Photo caption: A reindeer strolling