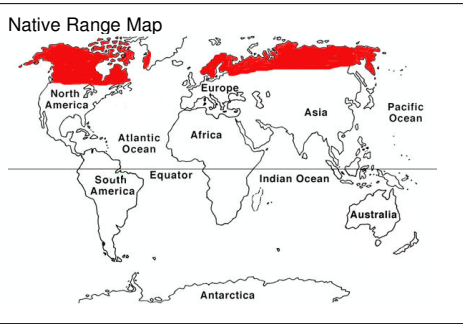


## Reindeer/Caribou



Photo courtesy of Lynne Panebianco



Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Subphylum: Vertebrata  
Class: Mammalia  
Order: Artiodactyla  
Family: Cervidae  
Genus: *Rangifer*  
Species: *tarandus*

### Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Caribou live in tundra, taiga, and boreal forest regions of North America, on Greenland, and on large northern islands. Reindeer live in the tundra regions of Eurasia and have been herded throughout their range for years.
- **Exhibit Location:** Wildlife Trails

### Characteristics

- Both sexes grow antlers, the only member of the deer family to do so. Antlers start to grow in early spring and are lost by the bulls shortly after the rut. Females keep their antlers through the winter and lose them about the time the calves are born in the spring. When antlers are growing, they are covered with soft brown “velvet.” This covering is made up of blood vessels that enable the antlers to grow. As rut begins, the blood supply stops, the velvet dries up and is rubbed off.
- The coat of the caribou is an excellent, lightweight insulation against the extreme cold temperatures. The hairs are hollow and taper sharply which helps trap heat close to the body and also makes them more buoyant (able to float in water). Color varies by subspecies, region, sex, and season. They generally have brown fur, with a whitish neck and mane; the belly, rump, tail, and underside are white.
- They have broad, concave, cloven hooves that spread to help walking on soft ground and are good for digging in snow. Footpads provide traction and good weight distribution on the boggy, summer tundra. Pads shrink and harden in winter and are covered with tufts of hair, preventing slipping when on snow and ice.
- Reindeer/caribou make a clicking noise when walking. This is produced from a tendon rubbing across a bone in the foot. It is believed that this helps keep the herd together in blizzard conditions.
- They have a keen sense of smell, allowing them to find food buried deep in the snow.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 10 years, but 4.5 is average; females live longer than males (bulls susceptible to predators after the rut when they are often injured or exhausted); **In Captivity** females may live 15 – 20 years, males much shorter

### Behaviors

- Reindeer/caribou are social animals that live in herds, migrating throughout the year from calving grounds to wintering grounds. They shift winter ranges from year to year, which minimizes overgrazing. Since heavy snow or ice can make it hard to find food, they often winter in areas where the snow cover may be less and lichens can be eaten.
- Herds usually form a homogeneous band of bulls, or of cows with calves and yearlings, but may also gather in groups numbering up to 100,000 of both sexes and all ages in late winter before the spring migration. As spring comes, the herd moves northward. Females move more rapidly, reaching the area for calving first.
- Especially active in morning and evening, caribou can run at almost 50 mph, but only for short distances. They are good swimmers with nearly 1/3 of its body above the water (air-filled hollow coat hairs give it buoyancy).
- Communication is done through vocal, visual, chemical, and tactile (touching) cues.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** branches to scratch against, maple browse (in season), different forages

## Reproduction

- Females reach sexual maturity between 16 and 28 months.
- Rut is an annually recurring condition or period of sexual excitement and reproductive activity in male deer beginning in the fall and lasting into winter.
- Mating occurs while on their way to the winter range. The gestation period is 228 days.
- In spring, pregnant cows lead the migration to the calving grounds, where each gives birth to a single calf. Twins are rare. The fawn is unspotted and resembles the adult, weighing 11 pounds at birth.
- Newborns can walk within an hour and in a day can outrun a person. They are weaned after about 45 days.

## Diet

- **In the Wild:** grasses, sedges, flowering plants, horsetails, willow leaves, lichens
- **At the Zoo:** alfalfa hay, pelleted herbivore mix

## Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- Caribou in the contiguous United States are considered endangered by some.
- Their habitat is being degraded through human-caused tundra fires, mining for gold, oil development, and pollution.
- Predators: wolves, humans, brown bears, wolverines, lynx, golden eagles

## Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Although called by different names in North America, wild caribou and domestic reindeer are considered to be the same species throughout the world.
- To cope with scarcities and hardships, they reduce food intake and lower their metabolic rate.
- In Eurasia, people long ago began to tame wild caribou. It is speculated that at first hunters learned that tamed deer on a leash could help them sneak closer to wild herds. Later, tame animals were used to pull sleds, and in some cultures they were saddled and ridden. Eventually people kept herds as a dependable source of food, hides, and transport.
- Today, the Sami or “Lapps” in Scandinavia, all across northern Eurasia to the Bering Strait, are native peoples who base their economies upon reindeer herding.
- In Alaska, hunters harvest more caribou than any other big game species.

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