



Reindeer and caribou are similar, but not the same

Reindeer are symbols of the holiday season. Legend states these antlered animals have a busy evening come December 24 — helping Santa Claus pull a sleigh weighed down by toys for the world's children. Why does Santa choose reindeer when caribou may be equally qualified for the job? It may be due to their greater history of domestication.

Although the terms "reindeer" and "caribou" are frequently used interchangeably, leading many people to assume they are the same creature, recent genetic mapping published in the journal Nature Climate Change shows caribou and reindeer are actually different animals. The journal determined that these mammals are quite similar and actually share the same scientific name, Rangifer tarandus, but they are only closely related cousins.

Reindeer may be slightly smaller and are generally more domesticated than caribou. Some people of the Nenets group in Russia keep reindeer for pets. The following are some other similarities and differences, courtesy of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

- Reindeer are shorter, stouter and more sedentary than the long-legged caribou.
- Caribou migrate longer distances than reindeer between wintering grounds and calving areas.
- Reindeer have thicker, denser fur than caribou. Both have unique hair in their fur that trap air and provide extra insulation.
- Both male and female reindeer and caribou grow antlers. However, female reindeer antlers grow larger than those of female caribou.
- Reindeer calves are born at the end of April and caribou calves at the end of May.
- Both animals have hooves that can be used as snowshoes for walking on the snow and for digging.
- Only in North America are wild Rangifer referred to as caribou.
- Reindeer have been herded for years throughout Alaska and some parts of Canada for their meat. However, caribou are largely wild animals that roam freely. As a result, caribou are hunted in the wild.

Reindeer may get all the glory come the holiday season, but caribou are equally impressive animals. These large mammals provide food and other materials for survival to those who live in cold climates across the world.

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