

Reindeer

In the Land of Fire and Ice.

Story & Photography by Dr. Lloyd Newberry



**UNDER
WILD SKIES**
FALL 2006

M

massive sets of antlers danced across the skyline as the reindeer moved slowly just below the ridge. It was an awe-inspiring sight and Toti and I were about to intercept them when we saw Murray and Bjorn trotting in a crouch about 400 yards behind the herd. Toti and

I climbed up on a rock to watch the scene unfold. The animals were a bit nervous as Murray had already taken two shots at one of the big bulls. Toti and I could see that the herd would be well out of range when Murray and Bjorn reached the end of the ridge.

Toti nudged me and pointed up the hill to our left. Another herd was moving down toward Murray and among them were several good bulls. Murray and Bjorn saw them and dropped down behind a rock as the reindeer continued toward them. Then, at 150 yards, the animals saw the larger herd and moved off to join them. But one nice bull with tall beams stepped outside the group and poised momentarily on a small knoll. It was his last mistake. Murray touched the trigger on his 7mm magnum and the bullet caught the bull just behind the shoulder. He swung around, took two steps and collapsed. It was 1 p.m. on our first day of hunting in northeastern Iceland. Now it was my turn.

For many years I had read of the wonderful hunting in Iceland, particularly for reindeer. Finally I had put this trip together, and hunting partner Lloyd Murray and I had left Savannah, Georgia, in August, arriving at Reykjavik, the nation's capital, on the 19th. Bjorn Birgisson, the owner of Icelandic Hunting Club, met us at the airport and from there we proceeded

east and then north on an eight-hour drive to the village of Egilsstadir, situated just a few miles from the coast.

Never had I witnessed such magnificent landscapes and picturesque villages. Sheep ranged throughout the emerald-green hills and on the rocky slopes. Small shops offering the best of hand-made woolen goods beckoned us to stop and we did. For nearly an hour we drove by the massive Vatnajokull Glacier and stopped to film bays studded with icebergs calving into the North

Atlantic. Families of swans waddled across green meadows and congregated by the thousands in several inlets. We passed Hekla, the most famous of many volcanoes in Iceland and one of the best-known in the world. A two-mile-long crack in its top has spewed forth eighteen eruptions in recorded history, the last in 2000. Steam rose from geothermals scattered along the landscape and mud-springs burped and bubbled.

Here in the land of eldur og is, fire and ice, there is no denying the great bellyache going on in the earth's bowels along the mid-Atlantic rift, a great crack in the earth's crust. Largely composed of volcanic material from eruptions, Iceland's geology remains in turmoil. It is truly an island of contrasts. Bathed by an arm of the warm Gulf Stream, yet located just below the Arctic Circle, the entire island seems an enigma.

We drove on, passing lava fields old and new, sand deserts and green valleys dotted with white-washed homesteads sporting bright red roofs. But most of the landscape was rolling tundra hills and mountainous slopes carpeted in a lush communal flora of grasses, mosses, wildflowers and lichens.

Old stone shepherd huts covered in sod gave evidence of a long history of a people who could conquer anything the land could dish out. Blond, blue-eyed children still carry the genes of Nordic and Celtic immigrants who established a fishing and agrarian culture here as far back as the tenth century.

We arrived at Egilsstadir and unloaded our gear into a two-story house on a picturesque lake. Bjorn uses several houses and cabins throughout Iceland for his hunters, the location depending on the type of game. The house was very comfortable, with all the modern conveniences. Bjorn had invited Toti Borgarsson and his wife Sibba to join us for the evening. Toti would assist Bjorn in guiding us for reindeer.



The author caught this sleek Atlantic salmon in between hunts for Iceland reindeer and wild geese.

Icelandic (European) reindeer were introduced from Scandinavia to the island nation in 1780. The thriving herd now exceeds 4,000 and roughly 800 licenses are issued

each year. For our hunt Bjorn had selected a high plateau a few miles southwest of Egilsstadir. Toti scouts the area often and had observed several herds with many good bulls.

August is a delightful month in Iceland and our first day had been sunny and mild. We had requested one day of salmon fishing if possible and Bjorn had it all arranged. He was able to get licenses for us on the nearby Selfjot River for our second day, so after a big breakfast we borrowed spinning rods and tackle

from Toti and drove to the river. Bjorn left us on a stretch close to the mouth of the Selfjot and the Arctic Ocean. Walking along the bank was easy and Murray quickly tied into an arctic char that hit a silver spoon. Five minutes later I was yelling for help as a six-pound Atlantic salmon bent my light rod double and went on a burning run downriver. I finally turned him and five minutes later brought the big fish to the bank and into Murray's hands. When Bjorn picked us up mid-afternoon, he was tickled to see that our catch would provide enough fresh salmon for several meals.

We hurried back to the house for a quick change from fishing to waterfowling outfits. Bjorn had told us to bring shotguns if we wanted to experience Iceland's goose hunting. Kristjan Jonsson, our guide for the evening hunt, drove us high into the mountains where the tundra gave way to rock, sand and lava. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but what Neil Armstrong called "magnificent desolation." It certainly resembled moonscape.

Kristjan used a GPS reading to locate a shallow depression of water nestled in an apron of grass.

Pinkfeet geese were using the acre-size pond as a roost site to avoid arctic fox. We had observed many geese the day before as they moved around the tundra to feed on small berries. Pinkfeet arrive in Iceland in the spring from Scotland. They remain high in the mountains until fall when they return to the United Kingdom.

We deployed a few decoys in the pond, which was only five inches deep. The grass was too short to hide us, but Kris was not worried. He said the birds would fly at dusk, and as long as we didn't show our faces, they would come right



A herd of reindeer feeds across the tundra while mist-shrouded mountains loom in the distance. Top left: The hunters stayed in this countryside home close by great salmon fishing, goose hunting, and fascinating old ruins, such as this shack where sheep once grazed atop the roof.

into the decoys. It was still good light at 9:30 when we heard their first plaintive cries.

"Geese's," Kris whispered and we froze face down. Just when it sounded like they were landing on our heads, Kris whispered, "take them," and we rose and fired. Three geese fell and seven flew off.

I was caressing the feathers and admiring my first of a new species when Kris whispered "geese's" again. A small flock glided into the wind with set wings, and just as the birds rocked back to settle into the decoys, we dropped all four. Pinkfeet were coming from all directions now, and my old L.C. Smith double was heating up. I don't know how many we could have taken, but I suggested stopping after we picked up nineteen. There are no limits on geese in Iceland and when you witness their vast numbers, it's understandable.

We were tired but enthusiastic over the events we had experienced in two days. But one thing loomed large on my mind: I had seen some really big bull reindeer that first morning and I was eager to kill one.

T

oti came for us at first light and we set off across the valley for a short drive into the highlands. Greylag geese were moving along the valley to feed in the lush meadows and a variety of ducks were dabbling in potholes along the river. Bjorn casually mentioned that he had a greylag hunt lined up for the afternoon. There is never a dull moment with this man.

Reindeer

My concentration now, however, was on finding a big bull. As we climbed higher we began to see ptarmigan flying to their feeding grounds. Bjorn had invited us to return in November for great shooting on the grouse, and we had put it on our calendar. We reached the high rolling plateau and began to glass for reindeer. To our south was Snaefell Mountain, which at 1,833 meters is the tallest in Iceland. Covered with snow, the old volcano was always in view and served as a good landmark. The tundra here is crisscrossed by a series of farm roads, which we used to access different glassing areas.

Bjorn spotted a large group of reindeer on a distant ridge and we drove closer to look over the herd. There were several nice bulls, but not quite the animal I wanted. Reindeer reach their prime in six to seven years, and I had seen a mature bull top a ridge the first morning out. It had massive tops, and a lot of height and width, exactly what I hoped to find.

As I glassed two bulls with trophy heads enough to make anyone happy, I tried to caution myself against haste. True, if we took the bull today, we could spend tomorrow driving back to Reykjavik along the north and west route, an area we had not seen. I really wanted to see Lake Myvatn and its huge concentration of waterfowl. But if I needed the next day to get the bull, we would have to fly back to Reykjavik early the following morning to make our flight. Both bulls really looked nice, but I reminded myself that all the girls get prettier at closing time.

Toti had another area in mind where he had seen some large bulls the day before we arrived, and in a

few minutes we were glassing that area. We spotted movement on a far ridge where several pairs of large antlers beckoned us to take a closer look. Toti and I began a crouched walk for a hundred yards or so until we reached a hummock where we could glass without being seen.

At two hundred yards we stopped to glass again. I didn't need my Swarovskis to see that one bull was outstanding, but Toti took a long look to be sure. Just as he smiled and said that's the one, the herd began moving off to our right. Like the black wildebeest of South Africa, reindeer seem to just start moving quickly in one direction or another for no apparent reason.

"Can you take him?" Toti whispered frantically. I slid the safety forward on the Browning A-Bolt, a 7mm Magnum in stainless steel with synthetic stock. I was steady enough in the prone position, but my scope was full of reindeer. The bull was moving at a steady walk, but younger animals were passing in front of him at a faster trot. Then for a moment he was clear. I moved the crosshairs with him and squeezed off a 160-grain round. The bull hunched his back at impact, indicating to me that I had hit him a few inches behind my intended point. But he was going nowhere. As the herd passed him by I waited for another clear shot that put him down for keeps.

The bull was every bit what I had come to Iceland for – and more. His massive main beams were tall and wide, with a handsome double shovel, and well-branched tops. He was by far the best of the caribou family I had ever taken.

I had two thoughts as I sat there admiring the magnificent animal. How fortunate I was to have hunted here, and why is this such a well-kept secret? Sitting here under the snow-capped shadow of old Snaefell, with beautiful sunny skies on an emerald-green landscape, it was easy to fall in love with this large island nation.

As Bjorn had indicated earlier, he had another adventure planned for the afternoon. After a delicious lunch of reindeer stew and smoked salmon, he carried us to a small grassy field bordering a clear stream. We put out three dozen goose decoys, then hunkered down in the high grass.

I was mesmerized by a trout hitting waterbugs in the stream when I heard the call of a lonesome goose. We froze and it came straight in. Murray rose and took the goose with one shot. It was our first greylag. Bjorn also guides hunters for specklebelly and barnacle geese as well as a variety of ducks, but today the greylag was what we wanted.

We sat for about twenty minutes before the cries of other geese once again got our attention. This time five circled, set their wings and came to our spread. I doubled with the old L.C. Smith, not hard to do at twenty yards. It was a wonderful afternoon in that small valley, and when we decided that we had shot our share, Murray called Bjorn to come and fetch us.

We accomplished more than we ever dreamed and got back to Reykjavik in time to meet Bjorn's lovely wife, Olessia, who had prepared grilled loin of lamb. I enjoyed my drive around the other side of the island and once again marveled at the majesty and contrasts of this special place. Catching hard-hitting salmon and shooting geese on a moonscape makes memories for a lifetime. But my big bull reindeer heads the list of many exciting moments in this land of fire and ice. *9/10/05*

Editor's Note: If you want to go, contact Bjorn Birgisson at The Icelandic Hunting Club, www.HuntingIceland.com