

ICELAND

LAND OF FIRE, ICE AND REINDEER

BY R. DOUGLAS YAJKO M.D.



While walking around the SCI's Hunters Convention a few years ago I ran into Jerome Knap, owner of Canada North Outfitting. I had hunted with Jerome many times in northern Canada and he asked me if I might be interested in an Iceland reindeer hunt. I was trying to find a free range reindeer hunt in Europe and had hit a wall in Norway and Sweden. Although available, the permits were hard to come by so I said yes before realizing it was a draw hunt. I asked J. Alain Smith to go along and we both gave him our deposits.

We waited a few months to find out we didn't draw. Alain drew the next year but I had to wait until my fourth year to draw. If you don't draw after five years, you're guaranteed a permit your sixth year. During this period, I met Bjorn Birgisson of the Icelandic Hunting Club who kept me in the draw and soon I was making plans for the hunt. A direct flight from Denver to Reykjavik instituted by Icelandair made the itinerary easy to make.

Iceland is a Nordic country with a population of 325,000 making it the most sparsely populated country in Europe. The largest city is Reykjavik, which is also the capital of the country. Iceland is volcanically and geologically active which I would learn firsthand. The interior consists of sand and lava fields covered by glaciers. Many glacial rivers flow to the sea. Fishing and agriculture were the mainstay of the economy until the Marshall Plan increased the diversity of the island. The island is south of the Arctic Circle and benefits from warm water flow to give it a milder climate.

The reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) was introduced to the island in the late 1700s. The herd has grown to more than

6,000 with about 1,000 permits (mostly local both male and female) per year. My plane landed early in the morning on a day when there wasn't a morning flight to Egilsstadir. After a rest in Reykjavik I headed to Egilsstadir and learned that there was greater seismic activity and the airlines were worried the volcano might erupt and disrupt their flight schedules.

Bjorn was waiting at the airport and soon we were off to his comfortable cabin. Another hunter, Tom Wright a rancher from Wyoming, was out hunting. We decided to sight the rifle in to make sure it survived the flight and were treated to the beautiful countryside of Iceland. Not only was the island incredibly green at that time of year, but there were waterfalls everywhere coming off the hillsides. We headed back to the lodge for a great dinner and waited for Tom to return. He showed up after a long day with a beautiful trophy in velvet.

Early next morning, I met my guide, Reimar Asgeirsson, and assistant guide, Gretar Karlsson. The trucks with oversize tires were loaded and we were off to the hunting area. We followed a long lake before climbing out of the valley floor to much higher ground. We were heading east of the highest mountain in Iceland named Snaefell. There we parked the vehicles after some four-wheel driving to a large plateau. We headed back toward the lake on a ridge looking at glacial rivers on both sides. After about two hours we spotted our first reindeer but it was a group of females with calves. We continued down the ridge for another four hours before spotting a large group of bulls on the edge of a large ravine. They were lying down so we went down and waited for them to move.

They got up in about an hour and headed toward us. We were lying on a steep ridge and thought we were out of sight. There were two nice bulls half way up the hillside that were not with the main group that looked quite good but were unapproachable. Finally the group got close enough to scope out and just as we got interested, they spotted some movement and turned and headed straight away from us toward the top of the ridge about 800 yards away. We stalked to about 300 yards, but thought we could get closer, and headed straight for the ridge to get above them and out of sight. We walked the ridge until Reimar thought we were above them and started slowly down. Soon we were crawling on a

small outlook over the herd. There were more than 30 bulls and some very big ones. Reimar spotted a somewhat unusual one that had very long tines off his bez and we settled on that one. The .300 Weatherby barked and the trophy was on the ground. After pictures and celebration, Gretar started back for the three-wheel ATV that would help us remove the animal out of the area. He returned and we loaded the animal and headed back to the vehicles.

At the vehicle, we loaded everything up and by that time it was almost dark. We saw some wonderful waterfalls and rivers full of water on the way back to the lodge. Goose hunting had started and some hunters were out for their first day. We arrived back at the lodge

too late for dinner. Tom and his wife had reindeer steaks and said it was wonderful. Tom left the next morning for a driving trip around the eastern coast of Iceland. I toured Egilsstadir and visited Reimar who doubles as the taxidermist. His studio was full of velvet antlered reindeer.

Due to the worry of an eruption and my call schedule I opted to leave rather than spend a few days goose hunting. The flight back went just west of Snaefell and the largest glacier, Vatnajokull. Arriving in Reykjavik it was the weekend of the Reykjavik Marathon and the town was full. Some good meals and fellowship later, I was off to Denver with memories of Iceland including green valleys, waterfalls, glaciers, volcanoes and reindeer. 🐃