



Outfitter Bjorn Birgisson of The Icelandic Hunting Club is flanked by Donna Boddington, left, and Alice Poluchova of CZ USA, with a fine double play on Greenland's free-ranging reindeer. They were taken during an August combo hunt for reindeer and muskoxen.

Muskox, Reindeer In Greenland

BY CRAIG BODDINGTON

In 980 A.D. Viking seafarer Erik the Red sailed from Iceland and settled in southern Greenland. At the time there were undoubtedly caribou of the *R. t. groenlandicus* subspecies, and there were Greenland muskoxen as well. (Duh, that's where they came from, with the herds in Alaska and on Canada's Victoria Island originally of Greenland stock).

Both of these are typical North American species, and although Greenland remains under the white cross and red background of the flag of Denmark, I trust we can agree that she is properly as well as traditionally a part of North America? This distinction is made because of the continental plates – with Iceland geologically part of Europe, and Greenland part of North America.

In the free-for-all of Arctic exploration a century ago some muskoxen were taken on Greenland, but only recently has organized, legalized muskox hunting on Greenland become a possibility. I first heard about it from Bjorn Birgisson of the Icelandic Hunting Club. In addition to his native Iceland, he had started outfitting hunts in southern Greenland. Okay, they were Greenland muskoxen.

It's always cool to hunt an animal in its original range, but I did one of the very first muskox hunts when Victoria Island opened nearly 30 years ago. I went in November, when it was bitter cold with little daylight. Later I hunted out of Coppermine in April, when it was still bitter cold, but at least we had a lot of daylight. I wasn't at all sure I needed another muskox all that bad. In fact, I was quite sure I didn't.

I was lucky, drawing an Iceland reindeer tag the first year I applied. It was a great hunt, and we had time in Bjorn's

snug cabin to talk about Greenland. The summer hunting, by boat, sounded interesting, but I still didn't need another muskox. Then he mentioned that he also hunted reindeer in the same general area as the muskox.

Bjorn is very fluent in English, but that had to be a language barrier issue. Surely he meant caribou, right? Wrong. It seems that the native caribou were fairly scarce in and around Greenland's (few) inhabited areas, so in 1900 (and again in 1950) European reindeer from Norway were introduced. For better or worse, they mixed with the native caribou, and they have done very well. On the west coast the herd is well over 100,000, possibly twice that. The southern islands where Bjorn hunts have five to ten thousand, with a large population of muskoxen just to the north.

Okay, now I was interested. Combination hunts are always fun, and it might well be a kick to hunt muskox when I could really see them without freezing my tail off. Ah, but free-range reindeer? The only other herds I am aware of are on Alaskan islands, no easier to get to than Greenland, and certainly not hunt-able in concert with summer muskox.

So the hunt was on for early August, my wife, Donna, and I joined by Alice Poluchova of CZ USA and *Petersen's HUNTING TV* videographer Conrad Evarts. Honestly, I had no idea what to expect. I based everything purely on my confidence in Bjorn Birgisson (said confidence not unfounded) – and most of my assumptions were incorrect. There is some summer muskox/caribou hunting in Canada, but the luxurious hide is an important part of a muskox trophy, and I believed the summer hides wouldn't be very good. Wrong. Our party shot four muskoxen, and all the hides were spectacular.

Now, where I got this one I have no idea, but I also had the impression that there weren't a whole lot of muskoxen in Greenland. Wrong again. The herd at the southwestern tip of the island was introduced from the harsher north 25 years ago, and they have done extremely well – no wolves, few polar bears, with most cows producing twins.

Hunting was by glassing the shoreline from a boat, then going ashore when we saw animals worth a closer look. We saw hundreds of muskoxen in dozens of herds – and the fjords had hundreds of Greenland's signature icebergs in all sizes and whimsical shapes.

The weather smiled for our first few days, and it was the first time I've had the chance to really see the shaggy beasts and look them over. We took countless photos and got great video, slept warm and dry, and all four of our muskoxen were spectacular. I had considered just doing the reindeer hunt and bypassing muskox, and that would have been a terrible mistake. I freely admit that I hate cold weather, so it was the most pleasant hunt for muskoxen that I have ever made.

Even though it was late summer, we were still in the Arctic and the perfect weather couldn't last forever. We hunted reindeer through three days of rain-squalls and low clouds, limiting visibility and almost certainly reducing animal movement. The methodology was the same, cruising sheltered fjords and glassing – and we were grateful for the stable 35-foot boat with a cabin that let us get out of the weather.

This particular reindeer herd hasn't been available to outsiders for very long, with most hunting to date done by hunters from Iceland and Denmark. It has produced monsters, but on our hunt the really big boys were somewhere on the high ridges, lost in the clouds.

Even so, we saw plenty of reindeer, passed a lot of bulls, and took three good, solid trophies. I'd let Alice and Donna take the first muskoxen, my theory being that I already had a very good Greenland muskox, and I didn't actually expect we would all be successful (wrong). So we held to the plan, and I took the first reindeer, a nice bull with good tops and bez, weak in the shovels. This set up the ladies very nicely, and on our last morning we found a herd of bulls bedded just a couple hundred yards above the shoreline, just a forest of antlers visible above a rock ledge.

We made a nice stalk and set up, and when they got up Alice dropped the biggest bull. They ran a short distance and stopped, and Donna dropped the next largest. Hers was very similar to Alice's – and of course, both were bigger than mine. Greenland is the stuff of legends, perhaps the least known corner of North America, at least to us of the Western Hemisphere. I wouldn't have missed seeing it – at least in the summertime.