

# Viking Caribou

Okay, in Iceland they're actually reindeer.



In Iceland the word “Viking” is pronounced *WEking*, accent on the first syllable, but it means exactly the same thing as it does to us, denoting the hardy Norse seafarers who traded and raided all across the North Atlantic, taking their open long boats all the way to North America 500 years before Columbus set sail. The Vikings colonized Iceland before 800 A.D., within a few generations establishing the first democracy in Western Europe, facts modern Icelanders are extremely proud of.

Those first settlers found Iceland’s rugged interior

surrounded by a rich coastal plain, and to this day Iceland’s entire human population lives fairly near the coastline. Much of that coastal plain was covered with low, ancient, slow-growing forest, cleared for building and fuel within a few hundred years. Today it’s unthinkable to cut a living tree. Some of the natural birch-like forest has returned, and for many years there has been active planting of larch and fir, but the majority of Iceland remains a vast treeless expanse, with green valleys alternating with ascending ridges until those ridges become the interior mountains.

PETERSEN'S  
HUNTING  
ADVENTURES TELEVISION

by Craig Boddington

**REINDEER**

When ice conditions are right, polar bears still occasionally wander ashore in northern Iceland, but the Viking settlers found no populations of large land mammals. Early hunters pursued the flightless great auk, now extinct, and netted puffins and other waterfowl that still abound in Iceland. Seasonally, they hunted marine mammals—seals, walrus, whales—and they raised sheep, cattle and horses. Ptarmigan, still plentiful, were once so thick that hundreds of thousands were exported annually to Scandinavia, where ptarmigan are key in a traditional Christmas feast.

that's the reindeer of legend. The real reindeer is a medium-bodied, large-antlered deer of the tundra, and his tribe, *Rangifer tarandus*, circumnavigates the globe just above the northern treeline. He looks a lot like our familiar caribou, but the reindeer is not the "European caribou." The European reindeer is actually the type specimen of these northern deer, *Rangifer tarandus tarandus*, while all the varieties of North American caribou are *Rangifer tarandus* something else. So it is correct to say our caribou are North American reindeer, but not vice versa.

Unlike caribou, reindeer have been

more interested in meat than antlers. Birgisson put me in for a unit where I'd have a pretty good chance, but I didn't draw the first time around. In most lotteries that's the end of the line, but Iceland has a backup system. Rejected applications are prioritized, and tags that aren't picked up are reallocated. Bjorn called me a few weeks after the draw; my number had come up, and we were on for an Iceland reindeer hunt.

**OPEN RANGE**

Over the years I've hunted all of the North American caribou, which I suppose is



The author and outfitter Bjorn Birgisson check zero before the hunt. Finding a good bench isn't a problem; benchrest shooting is quite popular in Iceland. The rifle is a CZ 550 in .270 Winchester.

can hide a forest of antlers.

This was not a forest of antlers or even a small grove. It was mostly cows and calves with a couple of young bulls, but it was my first glimpse of wild reindeer. They looked like caribou in summer coats, dark chocolate with just a bit of white showing on the neck and underparts. The two bulls had unimpressive antlers covered in heavy, dark velvet; they weren't tempting, but it sure was good to see them. They marched across a long ridge, dropped off the far side, then the big country

swallowed them again as if we'd never seen them. It was a good lesson. The rein-

deer were here; all we had to do was find them.

**THE LOST HERD**

Besides the fact Icelandic reindeer don't migrate, I found a couple of other significant differences between this hunt and any caribou hunt I'd ever done. One was our camp. Bjorn had a comfortable

the second a few miles to the north.

A second major difference was that we would do much of our glassing from roads. I have heard this is possible in certain areas in Alaska, but I have never personally glassed for caribou from any road or in proximity to any road. However, in Iceland the reindeer share the gentler coastal ridges with sheep and cattle, at least during the summer, and nothing, not even reindeer, penetrates to the harsh interior.

So we drove to known vantage points where Reimar and Gretar have glassed for reindeer since childhood. We spent most of our time along higher inland ridges, glassing eastward where, eventually, the ridges would descend to the sea. Iceland's reindeer bull season opens July 15th, with the cow season coming in a couple of weeks later. We were hunting the very last of July, which is still summer in Iceland—but summer is a relative term. It was cool and blustery, with rain squalls coming and going, our glassing hampered by low clouds drifting in and out.

After a time I understood we weren't just generally looking for reindeer, but



Although very green during the short summer, Iceland is a rugged island of recent volcanic origin. Snow is possible in any month, and it remains on the higher ridges throughout the year.

Reindeer were introduced from Norway as early as 1752, obviously as an alternative meat source. They came into ideal habitat, free from predators, and by the late 19th century there were tens of thousands of reindeer in eastern and southern Iceland. Then came breech-loading rifles, and their numbers dwindled quickly. Steps were taken to save the reindeer before it was too late, and today the eastern herd numbers about 7,000, with 1,300 tags issued by drawing in several management units.

Just what is a reindeer? The stubby-antlered deer that pulls Santa's sleigh? No,

semi-domesticated for centuries and in fact do pull sleighs in some northern cultures. They also still roam wild here and there, and there are hunting opportunities on the European continent. However, after more than a decade of sniffing around, I'd never quite figured out how to organize a European reindeer hunt. Then I met Bjorn Birgisson at a Safari Club convention, and it took about five minutes to set up things, provided I could draw.

Icelandic reindeer hunters are avid, with the tags hotly contested. The only saving grace is that there are more cow tags than bull, and a lot of residents are

why I wanted to add reindeer to my list of experiences. They are the ultimate open-country animal, generally visible at incredible distances, but they also inhabit some of the biggest, loneliest country on Earth. You may find a thousand in a herd, but that same herd may range over thousands of square miles, leaving lots of empty country around the edges of it.

When the caribou aren't exactly where you want them to be, sometimes you have to look until your eyes fall out. The reindeer country of eastern Iceland is as big as any caribou country, broad valleys and tundra ridges stretching forever. At first you expect to see reindeer

on every hillside, but that isn't going to happen. Then you start glassing the farthest ridges, hoping to pick up a spot of white cape or a hint of movement. After a few hours you realize the country is bigger than you are and bigger than the animals it holds. You are, in fact, looking for a needle in a haystack, and it doesn't take many hours of fruitless glassing before the task becomes daunting.

The only salvation is confidence, belief that what you're looking for is out there. I've done a lot of caribou hunting where it becomes increasingly difficult to keep the faith. Caribou are strongly migratory, and if you miss the migration there's an awful lot of empty tundra. A significant difference with Iceland's reindeer is they don't migrate. They shift back and forth, feeding into the wind, but they're out there somewhere.

We'd been working our way along a ridge system, glassing our hearts out, and I was starting to realize just how big this country was, whether or not the reindeer migrate. We were focused on the farthest ridgeline, just barely visible as low clouds drifted in and out. At that distance, I wasn't at all certain I'd be able to see anything, but my Viking friends, Reimar and Gretar, were scanning the same ridges with good spotting scopes. Movement caught my eye, so I turned to the right and watched as 80 reindeer appeared out of nowhere. That's the other thing about caribou and reindeer country: You think you can see it all, but you can't, and what seems a slight fold

cabin complete with electricity and running water, just off the main highway that encircles Iceland. It provided a warm and comfortable base of operations, with one of the two units my permit was good for across the road and

rather we were glassing for a particular herd of bulls. In theory these ranged along a set of valleys and ridges running from the main highway to the ocean, and in some years this legendary (or did I



The fog had been coming and going all day, and just after the author shot his reindeer it closed in completely. Another five minutes and he would have been stumbling around blindly trying to find the herd.

Craig Boddington

Craig Boddington



The author's impression was reindeer carry considerably smaller racks than caribou. It's true they don't get as big as the biggest caribou, but they are still very impressive. He was absolutely delighted when he walked up on his first and only reindeer.

think it was imaginary?) herd numbered more than 300 bulls. There was just one little catch: The season had been open for two weeks, and despite intensive looking—by all the local guides, not just my team—this theoretical, legendary, imaginary herd of bulls had not been seen. A primary reason was the same weather we were fighting—rain, fog, no visibility. The weather forecast showed we had a couple of days of relative clear, with heavy rain coming in. If this was clear, I'd hate to see partly cloudy.

Having seen what we could from the north/south ridges and with heavier weather seeming to be rolling in from the ocean, we took a road east along a

long ridge, allowing us to glass a ridge system to the south, where, theoretically, this big herd of bulls must be holed up. A bit after noon we were glassing from a highway turnout, really a scenic viewpoint, perched atop a frightening cliff. Bjorn and I were munching a sandwich and complaining about the weather while Gretar and Reimar remained glued to their spotting scopes. Then came a loud chorus of Viking cheers, as if they'd just spotted a village that needed raiding.

Bjorn and I took our turns at the spotting scopes. Far out across a broad valley, over an intervening ridge, across a second higher valley, a tall, steep ridge rose to the skyline. About a third of the

way down, there was a broad, sloping bench, and somewhere on that bench there was a dark shadow. It was almost invisible through binoculars, but through the spotting scope the shadow seemed to slowly shift and change shape. They had found the missing herd of reindeer bulls.

#### UNDER THE FOG

In just a few minutes another bank of clouds came in and covered the distant ridge, but not before we'd fixed the herd's location as well as possible, between two major drainages, above a (hopefully) distinctive rock outcropping. I have no idea how far away those reindeer were, possibly 10 miles—far enough there was no way to see whether they

were bulls or cows. I had to take on pure faith that this was the bull herd, and I did because my Icelandic friends clearly had no doubts.

We were able to drive some distance up the second valley, leaving the vehicles just a few miles from the herd's last known location. This, clearly, was also unlike any caribou hunting I'd ever done. Even so, by the time we circled around, found the right cow paths, gathered our stuff and hiked up to what we thought was the approximate elevation, a couple of hours had passed. Low clouds and mild showers had come and gone, and it was big country. The reindeer could've been anywhere.


I guess my friends factored in the herd's apparent movement when they planned the approach, because we hit them pretty well and in a break between clouds. This was not the whole group. We never saw them all, let alone properly counted them, but I figure there was something just over a hundred in this group, all bulls, many mature. On the skyline they looked like a vast forest of antlers.

A couple of low ridges allowed us to approach within 300 yards, and we were just starting to size them up when the herd began to move—straight toward

us. Okay, perfect. We burrowed down into the wet tundra and let them come. They held up again on a little ridge at about 150 yards, reindeer on parade, antlers of all sizes and shapes, but two or three bulls really stood out. There was a very big bull near the left-hand end of the herd, and we were pretty much decided on him when we saw, with horror, a big fog bank rolling down the ridge toward us.

Now entire groups of reindeer were erased, some reappearing, others simply gone. We focused on the left flank of the herd, watching tendrils of white engulf the reindeer, then retreat. The one we wanted was behind a younger bull and another reindeer behind him. Then he stood clear, facing. I waited a moment longer, and he turned almost broadside. The CZ .270 cracked, and

the ridge erupted with running reindeer. I had the correct bull in sight, but the shot wasn't clear. He ran right, turned back left to run with the herd, then dropped between two tundra tussocks, antlers upright. We let the reindeer vanish into the fog, then started walking toward the antlers.

In seconds the fog thickened, and long before we could reach them the antlers vanished completely as visibility shrank to a matter of feet. Fortunately, he was right where he'd fallen. 



Guides Gretar and Reimar flank outfitter Bjorn Birgisson and the author. It is specifically illegal to hunt from an off-road vehicle like this six-wheeled Polaris, but it's perfectly legal (and a great help) to use it to recover game.

#### NOTES ON HUNTING IN ICELAND

Nonresidents must be guided for reindeer, and in any case they need assistance in the permit application process and backup list that follows the draw. I used Bjorn Birgisson's Icelandic Hunting Club. – [huntingiceland.com](http://huntingiceland.com) In addition to reindeer, they offer waterfowl hunting (including puffin, perhaps Iceland's signature game bird), ptarmigan and both reindeer and musk oxen in Greenland. Reindeer hunts are relatively short (three to five days), but have been uniformly successful, with time for sightseeing recommended. Summer days in Iceland can be mild and beautiful, but they can also be wet and cold, with snow possible in any month. I layered using Northern Outfitters outerwear – [northernoutfitters.com](http://northernoutfitters.com) and have never been so comfortable on a northern hunt. Ditto for my feet. This was my first experience with Le Chameau leather-lined rubber boots, – [lechameauusa.com](http://lechameauusa.com) and they were easily the best I have worn for boggy hunting.

Puffin nesting grounds are an interesting attraction during the Icelandic summer. Hundreds of thousands of puffins nest annually, and during the spring months the puffin is an extremely important game bird.

