

Reindeer FAQ

Where in the wild do reindeer live?

Reindeer have a fairly wide distribution and are native to the Arctic and subarctic tundra, and some regions of northern Europe, Siberia and North America (where their cousins are known as 'Caribou'). Young reindeer are called 'calves,' female reindeer 'cows' and males 'bulls.'

Do females have antlers?

Yes, reindeer are the only deer species in which both males and females grow antlers. These bony antlers are covered by a furry skin, called velvet, which is filled with blood vessels that provide oxygen to the growing bone. Adult males shed their larger antlers in November, while females keep their antlers until April or May. This can look quite gory as the 'velvet' or skin quite literally pulls away and hangs off. Female reindeer are usually used in festive displays as they have their antlers at this time.

What do reindeer eat?

Reindeer are herbivorous and browse on a range of seasonally available foods, such as lichen, herbs, ferns, mosses, grasses, shoots, fungi and leaves. This pattern of eating is thought to be linked to their natural desire to roam vast distances. This behaviour is not possible when they are reduced to standing in a pen all day, without the opportunity to browse and roam. At farms in the UK, they are often fed an incorrect diet of feed for different species, rather than reindeer-specific food. They may also be eating straw or grass in the absence of good-quality hay. Lush pastures are thought to be inappropriate for reindeer and sudden changes to their diet are thought to lead to symptoms including upset stomachs, weight loss and neurological disease.

What is the conservation status of reindeer?

Reindeer are listed as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species reports that reindeer have been categorised as 'vulnerable' due to a 40% decline in population over the past 25 years or so.

How many reindeer are being imported and where do they come from?

Government figures show that from 2005 to 2018, a total of 1786 reindeer were imported from places such as Sweden, Finland and Norway. These countries have a very different climate to the UK and this can make reindeer susceptible to a variety of diseases and pathogens. Import restrictions were put in place in 2016 and 2018 due to the risk of introducing chronic wasting disease.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency confirmed that from the beginning of 2019 to the end of 2020 no reindeer were imported into the UK. Many reindeer hire companies in the UK are now choosing to breed reindeer, rather than import them. Some of the larger centres in the UK, have breeding programs with herds of 100 or more animals. Sadly, many people are unlikely to have the specialist knowledge needed to breed and care for these animals properly.

What is life like for reindeer in their native Scandinavia?

In Scandinavia, reindeer live in large herds and travel great distances. They have a natural desire to roam. Their home ranges can be as big as 190 square miles (500 square km), according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Their anatomical and physiological adaptations enable them to survive in the incredibly challenging weather conditions of the Arctic.

What happens to the reindeer once they are imported to the UK?

The UK has very different environmental conditions to those for which reindeer are adapted. Anecdotally, they are said to be fattened up, to enable them to survive through the winter, but often during spring they can lose weight, and their health declines. The relative warmth of the UK Summer also proves to be a challenge.

Why are reindeer parades and captive displays bad for reindeer?

Festive events can have a highly detrimental effect on reindeer's welfare. They are placed in a noisy, highly stressful environment, often with inescapable demands from people for interaction. Reindeer are often subjected to an extensive schedule of travel. Behind the scenes they are unable to roam the vast distances that they would choose if they were in the Arctic tundra.

What legislative protection is there for reindeer?

Reindeer are protected by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. This legislation makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering and for keepers to fail to ensure the reindeer's needs are met to the extent required by good practice. These needs include the provision of a suitable environment and diet; to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns; to be kept with, or apart from, other animals; and to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

Do you have any information on reindeer deaths?

Unfortunately, reindeer keepers are not obliged to notify the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) of unusual deaths. Government figures reveal that from 2018 to November 2020, 37 reindeer carcass samples were sent for post-mortem. The results revealed a range of diagnoses, including pneumonia, poor nutrition, fever, broken bones and dental conditions. 10 of these deaths were in animals less than a year old. Reindeer may naturally live for around 12 years in their native environment. These worrying results may be the tip of the iceberg.

Can reindeer spread diseases to humans?

Reindeer carry microbes dangerous to humans, such as salmonella, campylobacter, E coli and Yersinia. Visitors are encouraged to stroke and feed reindeer at captive events and unfortunately many may not choose to make use of hand sanitising facilities.

How many reindeer are there living in the UK?

The number of reindeer in the UK is unknown because there is no formal requirement for them to be recorded on any official database. Reindeer keepers are not likely to register them in the same way as 'livestock,' as they are not considered to be 'farmed' by the Farm Animal Welfare Council. Agricultural census data and the Animal Movement Licensing System (AMLS) do not readily distinguish reindeer from other deer species. However, a report by the organisation Born Free

Foundation in 2021, found 511 reindeer included on exhibition licences in England, and 86 on performing animal registers in Scotland and Wales.

What have other animal protection groups said about the issue?

“They (reindeer) are not easy to look after properly, and they are susceptible to stress and a host of health and welfare problems when kept in permanent captivity in the UK, particularly in more southern areas. These are semi-wild animals that are highly adapted to the Arctic environment. They have very different needs to deer that are native to the UK, and it is much more difficult to meet their needs, particularly when kept by non-specialists in small groups for use at festive events. This means having them in a busy environment, surrounded by crowds, noise and lights during a festive event which makes it even more difficult.”

RSPCA spokesperson

"Thankfully, the days when animals were forced to perform in circuses are increasingly coming to an end. In the supposedly enlightened 21st Century, most people understand that animals should no longer be used as objects of entertainment. It is cruel and demeaning. Now it is time to stop the barbaric practice of using animals in Christmas events. Local authorities and management companies have a responsibility to educate and to be at the forefront of animal welfare best practice. At a time when public opinion is increasingly opposed to animal cruelty in all its forms, we should be demonstrating why using animals for amusement is just not right, rather than being stuck in the dark ages."

Simon Cowell, CEO, The Wildlife Aid Foundation

Have vets spoken out about keeping captive reindeer?

“Reindeer have adapted to live in the Arctic. They are not well able to cope with the stress of captivity, and most of the diseases we see here in reindeer are stress-related.”

- Dr John Fletcher, founder of the Veterinary Reindeer Society

“Reindeer are highly specialised Arctic deer. The recent fashion of keeping them in captive situations many degrees south of their normal range is fraught with health and welfare issues.”

Dr Aiden Foster, veterinary expert