

Written by Kerry G. Everitt Design & illustrations by Judie L. Shore

## The most famous reindeer of all...

Because their habitat is restricted to the North Pole, and they are almost never seen, we have little information on the subspecies of reindeer that are able to fly to help Santa deliver presents on Christmas eve. Using some deductive logic, we can dig deeper to answer the question about the gender of Santa's reindeer. Since reindeer are also known as "old world caribou," we can assume that they have common characteristics to the caribou that are found throughout the rest of Canada. In nearly every drawing of Santa's reindeer, they have antlers. Both males and females of this species have antlers so this doesn't help answer the question. Re-read the section about caribou to find a clue that will help you find the correct answer.



## Coins for Caribou

Want to see a caribou but not sure where to look? Grab your piggy bank and you're on your way! In 1937, the caribou was chosen to be on the "tail" of the Canadian quarter and, except for special edition coins, has remained there ever since.

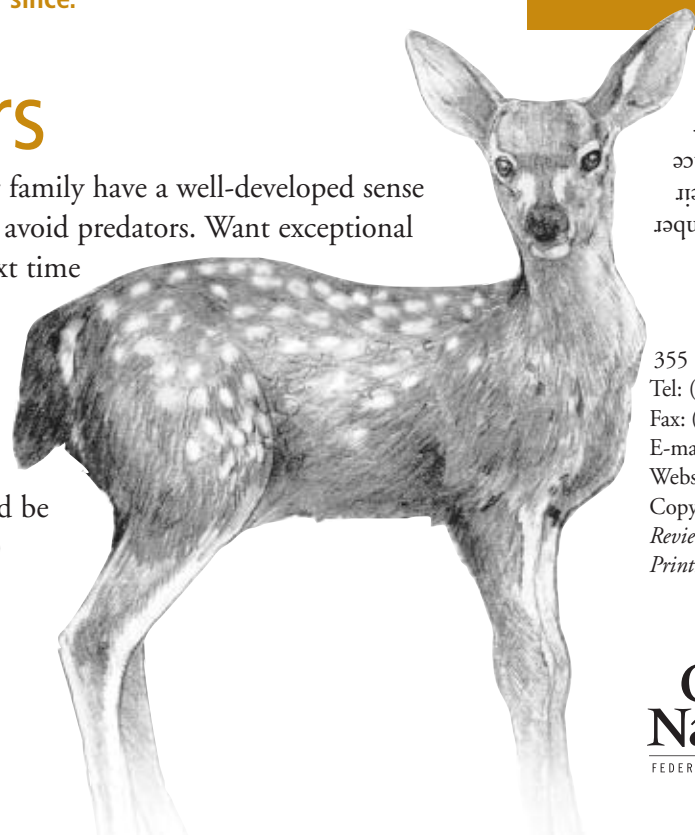


Want to learn more about these amazing animals? Check out these resources!

Hinterland Who's Who – [www.hww.ca](http://www.hww.ca)  
 Environment of Canada Species at Risk – [www.speciesatrisk.ca](http://www.speciesatrisk.ca)  
 Royal Ontario Museum – [www.rom.on.ca/ontario/index.php](http://www.rom.on.ca/ontario/index.php)  
 The Toronto Zoo – [www.torontozoo.com](http://www.torontozoo.com)

## Deer Ears

All members of the deer family have a well-developed sense of hearing to help them avoid predators. Want exceptional hearing too? Try this next time you are outside in the forest: Stand perfectly still. Cup your hands and hold them behind your ears, palms facing outwards. Sounds should be amplified (made louder) because your hands are acting like the large ears of deer or moose.



*Answer:* Male caribou lose their antlers in November or December. Only the females keep their antlers into the later winter months. Since Christmas is December 25, Santa's reindeer must be female!

355 Lesmill Rd, Toronto, ON M3B 2W8  
 Tel: (416) 444-8419, 1 800 440-2366  
 Fax: (416) 444-9866  
 E-mail: [info@ontarionature.org](mailto:info@ontarionature.org)  
 Website: [www.ontarionature.org](http://www.ontarionature.org)  
 Copy Editor: Victoria Foote  
 Reviewer: Jimmy Blackwood  
 Printing: DTP Inc.



Supplement to ONNATURE, Spring 2006

# Caribou and Moose and Elk Oh Deer!

Male moose, like caribou, use their antlers as weapons.



Deer, caribou, moose and elk are all members of the deer family. These species are **ungulates**, meaning that the animal has a split, or cloven-hoof, and that they are cud-chewing. The males of each species have antlers, also called a rack.

## Caribou

Caribou can be found throughout Canada. The name "caribou" comes from the Mi'kmaq word "xalibu" meaning "the one who paws" because in their snowy habitat, they often must dig to find food. Caribou are unique within the deer family as both males and females have antlers, although the female's antlers tend to be much smaller.

There are three different types of caribou found in Canada: the **barren-ground**, **Peary** and **woodland caribou**. The Peary are the smallest of the three and live on the isolated islands of the Canadian Arctic. The barren-ground caribou are larger and darker in colour than the Peary. This species is the most numerous of the three.



Hundreds of thousands of barren-ground caribou live in the tundra from Alaska in the west to Baffin Island in the east.

Woodland caribou inhabit pockets of the boreal forest as well as mountainous areas across the country. Caribou are the only large mammal that can use small plants called lichen as a main food source. This is an important adaptation as lichens are available in the winter when other vegetation is not.

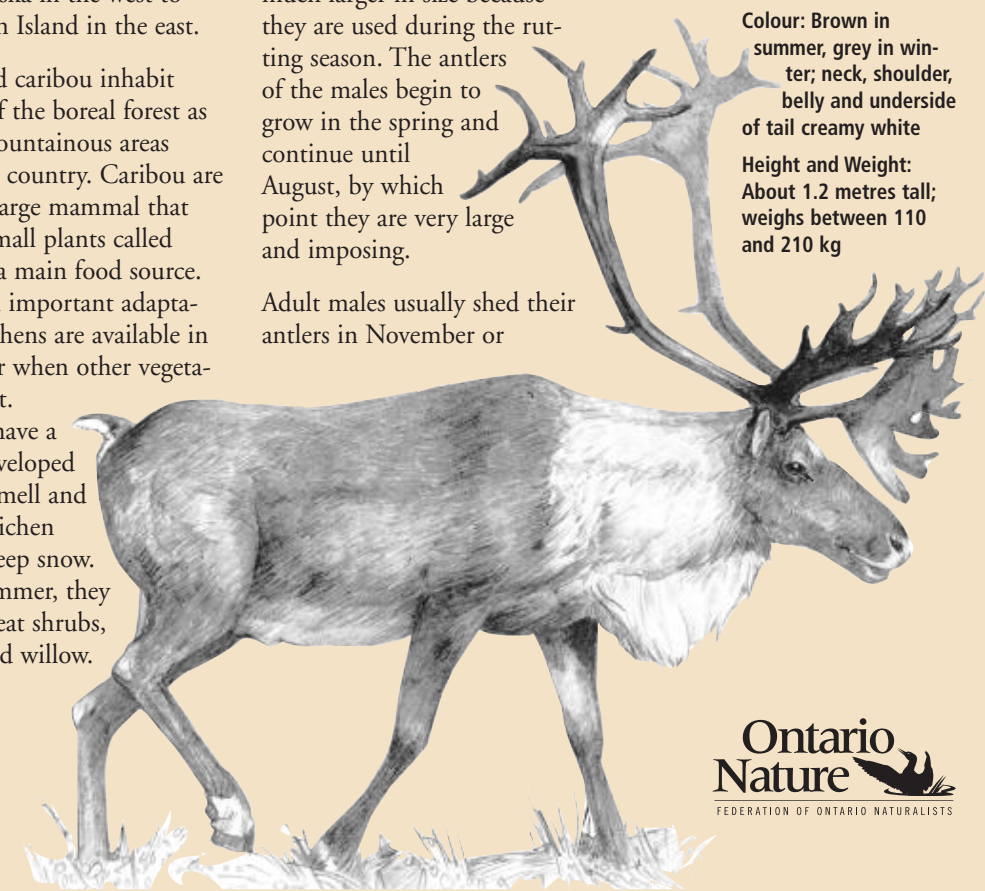
Caribou have a highly developed sense of smell and can find lichen even in deep snow. In the summer, they prefer to eat shrubs, grasses and willow.

Although both male and female woodland caribou have antlers, those of the males are much larger in size because they are used during the rutting season. The antlers of the males begin to grow in the spring and continue until August, by which point they are very large and imposing.

Adult males usually shed their antlers in November or

December but the females keep their antlers longer, even throughout the winter.

**Colour:** Brown in summer, grey in winter; neck, shoulder, belly and underside of tail creamy white  
**Height and Weight:** About 1.2 metres tall; weighs between 110 and 210 kg





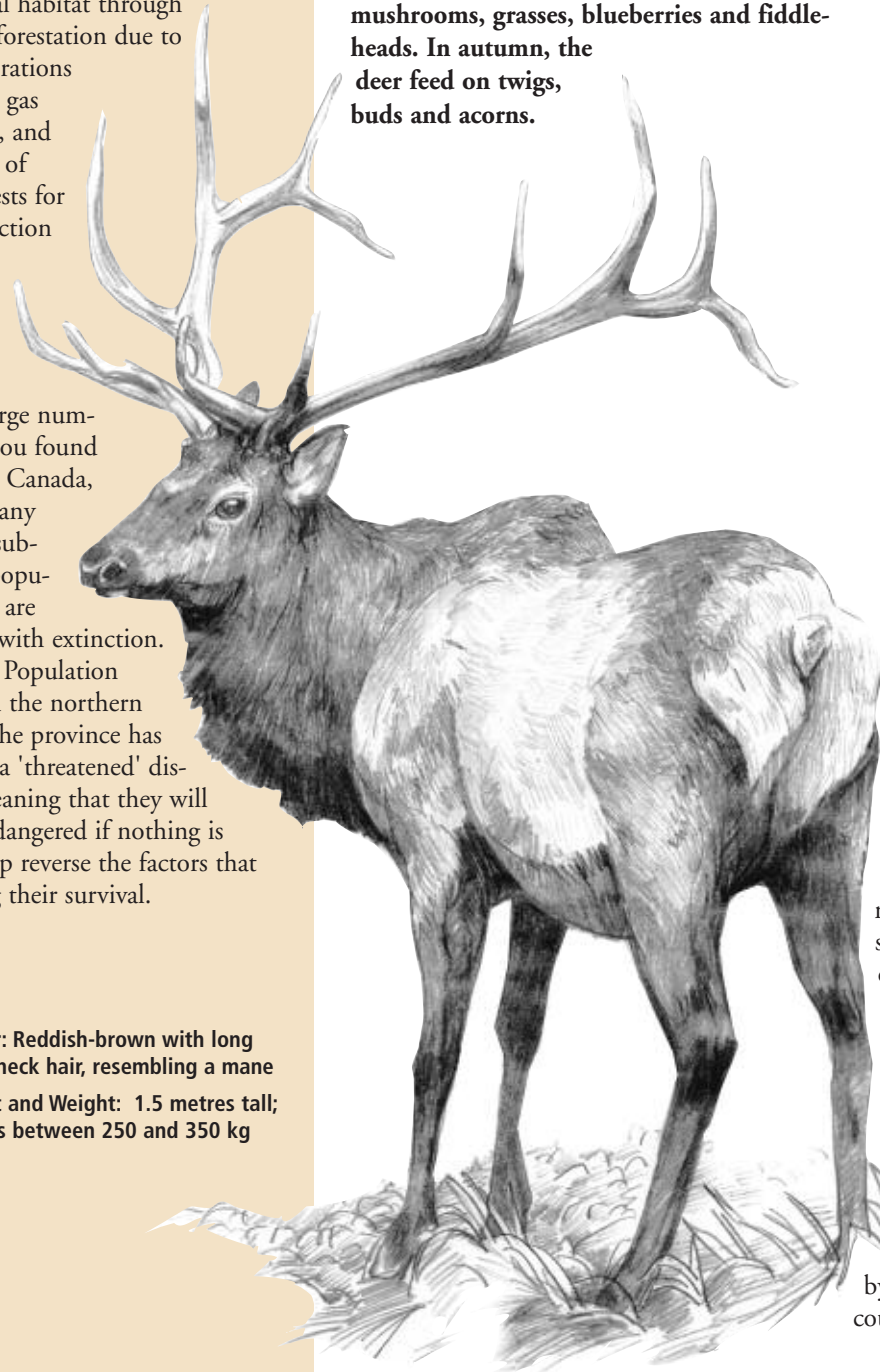
When a male's antlers are full grown in late September and early October, the rut or mating season begins. Male caribou have furious battles with each other using their antlers as weapons. The winner of this jousting match mates with one of the females who will give birth to a single calf the following spring. Unfortunately, the survival rate is low for newborn and young caribou. Less than half of the newborns survive past their first year. Life is difficult when food is scarce, temperatures dip to well below freezing, and predators such as wolves, bears, coyotes, lynx and cougar are on the look out for young caribou.

Caribou herds are also losing much of their natural habitat through logging, deforestation due to mining operations and oil and gas exploration, and destruction of natural forests for the construction of roads and pipelines.

Despite the relatively large number of caribou found throughout Canada, there are many individual sub-species or populations that are threatened with extinction. The Boreal Population that lives in the northern reaches of the province has been given a 'threatened' distinction meaning that they will become endangered if nothing is done to help reverse the factors that are limiting their survival.

#### Elk

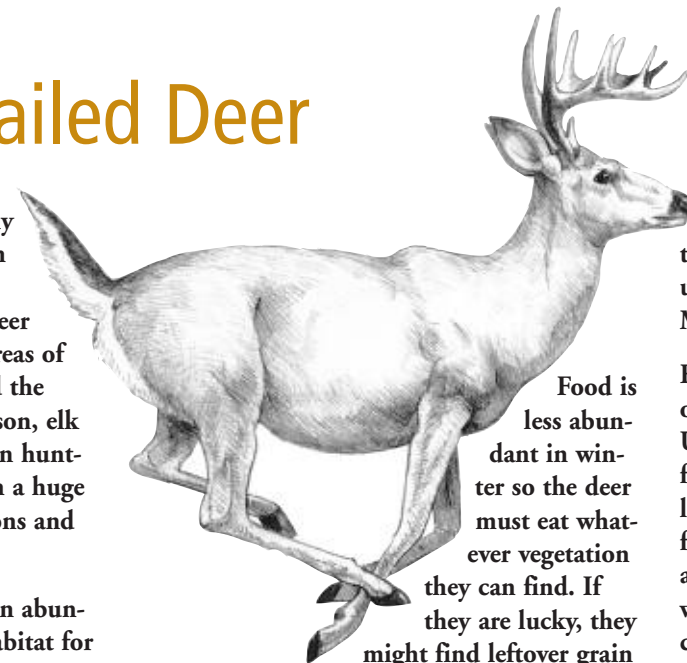
**Colour:** Reddish-brown with long black neck hair, resembling a mane  
**Height and Weight:** 1.5 metres tall; weighs between 250 and 350 kg



## White-Tailed Deer

The white-tailed deer is the most abundant and widely distributed of all mammals in North America. At the time of early European settlement, white-tailed deer inhabited only the most southern areas of the province. Logging, farming, and the reduction of competitors such as bison, elk and moose along with restrictions on hunting white-tailed deer, has resulted in a huge increase in white-tail deer populations and the areas in which they live.

Any forested or shrubby area with an abundant supply of vegetation is ideal habitat for white-tailed deer. In the spring they feast on mushrooms, grasses, blueberries and fiddle-heads. In autumn, the deer feed on twigs, buds and acorns.



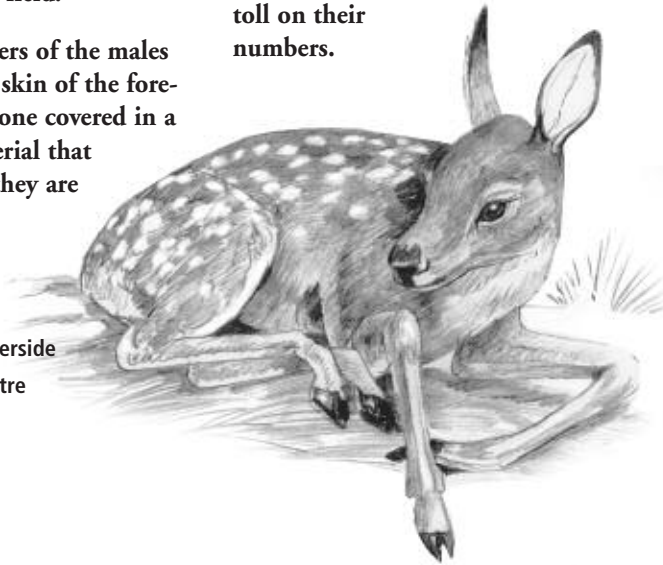
Food is less abundant in winter so the deer must eat whatever vegetation they can find. If they are lucky, they might find leftover grain in a farmer's field.

In the early spring, the antlers of the males appear as bumps below the skin of the forehead. Antlers are made of bone covered in a layer of soft velvet-like material that nourishes the antlers until they are fully grown.

**Colour:** Brown body. When startled, flips tail into air, showing the white underside  
**Height and Weight:** About 1 metre tall; weighs about 110 kg

By late summer, the velvet begins to dry and peel off. Antlers are used for protection and during the rutting season. They usually fall off between December and March.

Fawns are born in the spring and can walk on wobbly legs within minutes of their birth. Unlike many other mammal species, the female will leave her fawn unattended for long periods of time. Fawns are well-camouflaged creatures as they are covered in spots and very difficult to see. Predators such as wolves, coyotes, bobcats and wild dogs can certainly reduce the number of deer, but a severe winter often takes an even greater toll on their numbers.



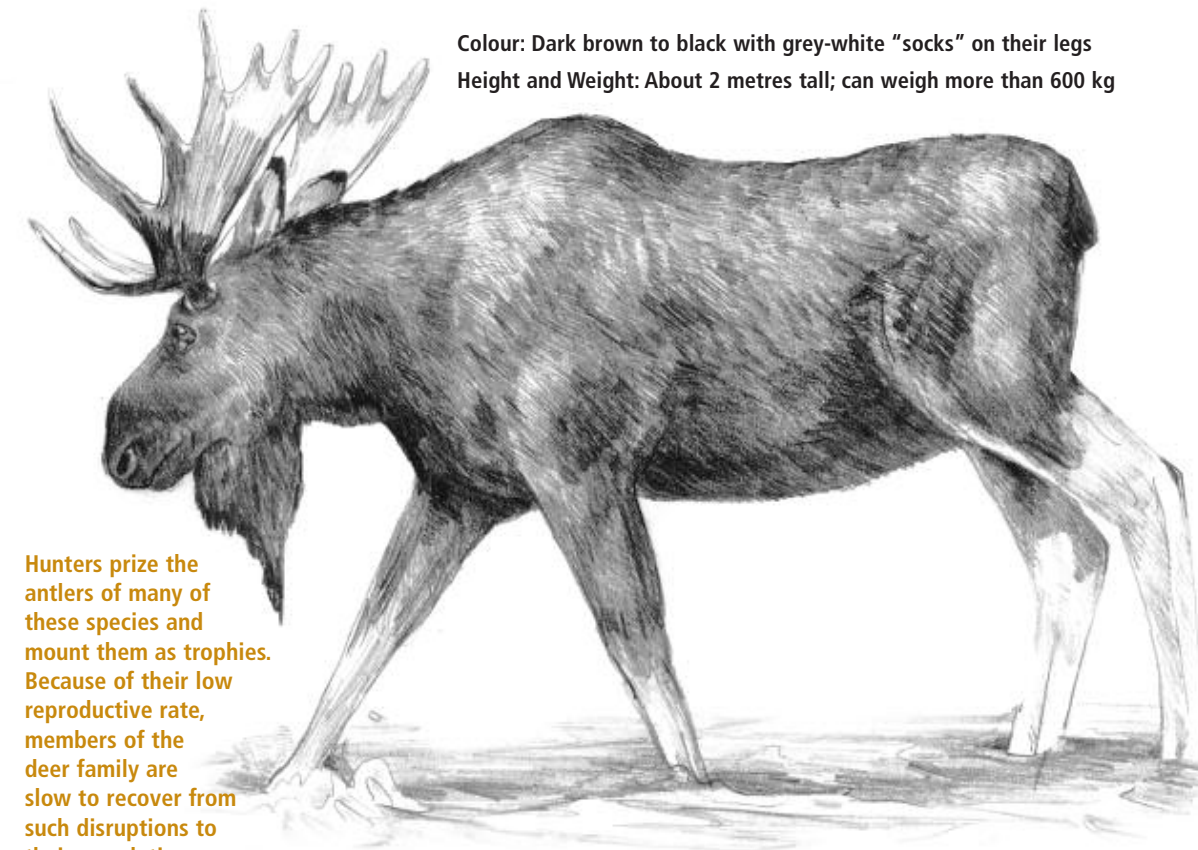
## Elk

North American elk are also known as the "wapiti," meaning "white rump" in Shawnee. Elk are slightly smaller than moose. Males have impressive antlers that begin to grow in the spring and are shed in the fall. They are vocal animals and can be heard grunting and squealing as they communicate to one another. When frightened, elk actually bark and roar.

Helpless calves are isolated from the rest of the herd for about 10 days after their birth. During this time the female makes sure the calf remains silent so as to not attract predators. Nearly 50 percent of all elk calves are killed by black bears, wolves, coyotes and cougars.

When Europeans first came to North America, elk were widely distributed throughout the Great-Lakes St. Lawrence region, the prairies and parts of British Columbia. Due to hunting and habitat loss, elk became extirpated from Ontario and Quebec. In the 1920s and thirties, elk were re-introduced into much of their original habitat. Despite these efforts, a relatively small number of elk live in Ontario due to the continued loss of their habitat from development.

Ungulate populations face many challenges in survival. As cities and towns get bigger, deer, moose, caribou and elk are forced onto marginal lands that cannot support their populations. Further problems arise because the conversion of forests to agricultural land increases the number of competitive species such as rabbits and mice that eat the same food source as deer, caribou and elk.



**Colour:** Dark brown to black with grey-white "socks" on their legs  
**Height and Weight:** About 2 metres tall; can weigh more than 600 kg

## Moose



The largest member of the deer family, moose have long, slender legs that support a massive, muscular body, huge head and, in the males, an impressive rack of antlers. The antlers begin to grow in

the summer and are fully developed by September. The antlers can be over 150 centimetres apart at their widest point and contain many spikes that are about 30 centimetres long. Antlers are usually shed in November.

Moose are found throughout most of Canada from the forested hills and mountain ranges in the west through the prairies, the northern tundra and the boreal forest. Their long legs allow them

to move through rough terrain, over fallen logs and through deep snow.

Moose are excellent swimmers and can dive to depths of 5.5 metres or more in search of food. In the summer, a moose can eat up to 30 kilograms of twigs, leaves, shrubs and water plants a day! In the winter, they eat twigs from balsam fir, dogwood, birch and maple trees and, when desperate, will strip the bark off of poplar trees.

A moose calf is nearly helpless at birth and the mother must be sure to keep her new offspring well hidden from predators. The calves gain weight and strength quickly. By about two weeks of age, they can outrun a person and swim quite well.

Moose have poor eyesight but an excellent sense of smell which they use to search for food and to sense danger. Wolves, bears, wolverines and cougars prey on moose calves. A pack of wolves can attack and kill larger moose as well as those that are injured or sick.

Hunters prize the antlers of many of these species and mount them as trophies. Because of their low reproductive rate, members of the deer family are slow to recover from such disruptions to their populations.