

Iceland Reindeer Hunt

Submitted by Donald Black

It was hard to tell my friends that I was going to hunt a Reindeer. I am certain that everyone who I told that I was going to hunt this animal species immediately thought of the pictures they have seen on television and in National Geographic and elsewhere of the tiny little creatures that have been domesticated by the Laplanders of Scandinavia. And they certainly thought of Santa's sleigh being pulled through the air on Christmas Eve by Dasher and Dancer, Prance and Vixen, Comet and Cupid, and Donder and Blitzen. Like me, they surely could not forget Gene Autry's 1949 recording about the most famous Reindeer of all, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer".

Nonetheless, it was truly a Reindeer hunt that I had planned. However, this hunt would not be on a farm in Denmark or Norway or Sweden but would occur in Iceland which is located in the North Atlantic just below the Arctic Circle. The Reindeer in this country were presented to the people of Iceland by the King of Denmark approximately 350 years ago and have never been fenced or domesticated. Today they range freely in the eastern portion of the country very near the largest glacier in all of Europe. The herd, which currently numbers around five thousand, is fast growing in part, apparently, because of several recent mild winters. Licenses are limited, however, and applications greatly out-number the available tags. Most tags are awarded to local hunters who prize the tastiness of the meat of a cow Reindeer and appreciate the less expensive cost of the cow license.

Reindeer should be known as European caribou. In appearance, characteristics, and habitat they closely resemble the six species of North American caribou recognized by Safari Club International: the Woodland caribou, the Quebec-Labrador caribou, the Central Canada barren ground caribou, the Arctic Islands caribou, the Mountain caribou, and the Alaska-Yukon barren ground caribou. My friends could accept the concept that I was going to hunt a Caribou much easier than they could the fact that I was hunting a Reindeer.

All Reindeer hunters in Iceland must use the services of a licensed guide. Even licensed guides must use the services of another licensed guide. Reindeer are found on big, open tundra with few landmarks and weather conditions are frequently bad. Although other outfitters are available, I chose to use the services of The Icelandic Hunting Club owned and operated by Björn Birgisson, www.HuntingIceland.com, to outfit my hunt. Björn employs well qualified guides who used equipment such as high centered four wheel drive vehicles and six wheeled Polaris ATVs which were in excellent condition. Living arrangements were modern, clean and comfortable. English, though not the local language was spoken by everyone whom I met.

Daylight is plentiful in late summer in Iceland. There is sufficient light to begin hunting by 3:30 a.m. and light adequate for hunting continues past 10:30 p.m. After hunting in rain and dense fog along two tracks across the tundra the better part of the day my guide Töti and I spotted a herd of Reindeer in the distance. We estimated the herd to number around 500 animals. Leaving the Toyota and traveling nearly seven miles by ATV, while keeping a slight ridge between us and them, we were able to reach the rear of the herd. A three hundred foot stalk on foot using the ridge and rocks to hide our approach put us in position to locate and evaluate one of the trophy bulls which are often found at the back of the herd. A one hundred twenty yard shot secured my prize and, except for photographs and the task of tagging, dressing and transporting the animal back to the Toyota, my Reindeer hunt had ended.