

Best “Caribou” Hunt Ever

Boddington and Bjorn Birgisson of Icelandic Hunting Club with a good reindeer, taken in Eastern Iceland. As “caribou hunting” goes it was the easiest caribou hunt of my career – and one of the best.



BY CRAIG BODDINGTON

Well, they looked like caribou, but I wasn't exactly hunting caribou. I was hunting reindeer. Actually, it's more correct to say that caribou look like reindeer, since the type specimen, *Rangifer tarandus tarandus*, is the European reindeer, and all North American caribou are *R. t. "something else,"* meaning subspecies of European reindeer. To say they're all somewhat similar would be an understatement.

Norway is the primary destination for European reindeer, but it isn't easy for an outsider to make a connection. Or at least I never managed to make a connection, but a couple of years ago, at our annual convention, I ran into Bjorn Birgisson of the Icelandic Hunting Club. Yep, he had reindeer (and ptarmigan, and ducks and geese, even puffins). The reindeer herd in eastern Iceland is about 7,000 animals, with 1,300 tags by drawing. The majority are cow tags, mostly sought by Iceland hunters; bull tags are fewer, but the odds aren't that bad – and there's a backup list for tags that aren't grabbed up by the folks who initially drew them. That's how I got my 2009 tag: I failed in the drawing, but I was fairly high on the backup list, and in a couple of weeks I was advised that I had my tag.

The bull season is fairly long, July 15 to September 15, with the cow season starting later, but the Icelandic summer is short. Birgisson likes to do his reindeer hunts early, when the weather is good and before there has been too much pressure from the more numerous cow hunters. Regardless of what you call them, I did understand I was hunting for a nomadic tundra creature, a herd animal wandering over very big country. I was therefore surprised, not unpleasantly, that Icelandic Hunting Club banks on short hunts and has yet to

fail. Heck, I've failed on caribou hunts that weren't particularly short.

On the ground, Iceland is a large and almost treeless piece of tundra. The reindeer of eastern Iceland occupy vast expanses of mountains, fjords, and broad riverine valleys, and finding them is indeed like looking for a needle in a haystack, this complicated by fog that often blocks visibility. So it doesn't sound all that easy, and in fact would be very difficult if not for certain factors that make Iceland unique in the world of caribou/reindeer hunting (at least in my experience).

Perhaps most important is the simple fact that these reindeer don't migrate. They do drift considerable distances, feeding into the wind, but when the wind changes they come right back. The local guides grew up hunting them, and know where to look. This doesn't mean there are reindeer in every vista. We looked at a lot of empty tundra before we saw any reindeer, but the looking is simplified by the fact that a lot of glassing can be done from roads. I've never done *any* glassing for caribou from a road, although I'm told it's possible in certain Alaskan areas. By the way, this means it will be an *easier* hunt than many caribou hunts, but not necessarily *easy*. The country is very big with a lot of relief, and once reindeer are spotted you must get to them on foot.

So the hunting methodology was to move from vantage point to vantage point, covering a great deal more ground than would be possible on foot or even by boat (as is done in several caribou situations). Also a bit different in my experience is that we weren't looking for any reindeer that might be out there. We were looking for one specific herd of bulls, grouped together for the summer, with a known (but fairly general) location.

My hunt was at the end of July, two weeks into the bull season. In actual fact this herd, though locally famous, had not been seen so far in this season. The reason was simple. The coastal mountains it calls home had been fogged-in for days, and the bull hunters scheduled ahead of me had been obliged to look elsewhere. We caught a very small break in the weather, so my local guides, led by Reimar Asgeirsson, were determined that we would find this herd. Man, we looked at a lot of empty ground while fog and rain drifted in and out.

I was off a little way doing something (no doubt important) with the camera crew when a chorus of cheers sounded from behind us. Yes, they had found the herd. Or at least I had to take their word that this was the herd they sought. We were on one high ridge. The reindeer were several ridges and several miles away, and even in the spotting scope they were just a dark shadow on the tundra, no way to see actual antlers.

In a given year, or at a given time, there might be 300 bulls in this herd. When we caught up with them (several tough hours later) there were more than 100. Even so it was impossible to see them all, as they shifted in and out with fog dropping fast. I know we shot the biggest bull we could see and identify, but I also know we didn't see them all. That doesn't make much difference to me. We picked out a very tall bull with great top points, not bad shovel and bez, and we shot him about 30 seconds before the fog swallowed the herd completely.

I left Iceland a few days later, and despite some serious looking, that herd had not yet again been seen. So I got lucky, but I've paid my dues on a lot of tough caribou hunts, so I always figured I had at least one easy "*Rangifer tarandus*" coming. I just never figured I'd have to go all the way to Iceland to find him.