

Marine on St. Croix farm's reindeer make most of the Santa connection

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Posted:

TwinCities.com

It's no coincidence that the reindeer at Johmar Farms total eight -- the same number that guide Santa's sleigh through the night in the famous 1823 poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas."

Owner John Block says his family's farm outside Marine on St. Croix is something of a pit stop for jolly old Saint Nick, whose famous flying reindeer need to take a rest during their busiest night of the year.

"There's times when Santa needs to switch out his reindeer on Christmas Eve," Block said. "He leaves his here and takes ours."

When they're not flying from rooftop to rooftop, the Block family's reindeer are spending the Christmas season busy with appearances in the area. Some provide visuals while others strap on the reins and pull sleighs.

"When you consider some of them can have 35 pounds of antlers at the top of their heads, you know their neck and shoulders have got to be strong," said Block's wife, Mary. "And they are -- they are tremendously strong."

Outside of Johmar Farms, Santa has few options should he need some extra help while flying over Minnesota. Despite the state's cold winters, which reindeer love, there are only 10 farms in Minnesota that have reindeer, according to the Minnesota Board of Animal Health.

One possible reason -- reindeer can be costly to keep. They eat a special diet and require a pen at least 8 feet tall. And concerns that they could contract chronic wasting disease mean they're more regulated than many other animals.

"There's paperwork all over the place," said Mary Block.

But thanks to the cold winters, reindeer can feel quite at home here. While humans are warming themselves by the fire and complaining about weather being frightful, reindeer find it absolutely delightful.

"When it snows, they go out and play; they really do," Mary Block said. "It's amazing, even the older ones. They love it when it gets cold and snowy."

That makes sense, considering the animals make the Arctic region their home.

Reindeer are considered the same species as caribou and are part of the deer, or Cervidae, family. While caribou are native to the colder regions of North America, reindeer are not. They are instead found in northern Eurasia, from Siberia to Norway, where they were domesticated around 2,000 or more years ago and are still herded today.

Reindeer also can be found herded in Alaska -- mostly on the Seward Peninsula. The animals were brought to the state from Siberia in late 19th century after migrating caribou proved undependable, causing some native Alaskan communities to suffer a food shortage, said Perry Barboza, professor of

biology at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks.

"Caribou and reindeer are very important food sources," Barboza said. "There are a lot of communities in the north that rely upon them. It's like the bison for the Plains Indians."

Reindeer do differ from their North American counterparts somewhat. For one thing, they tend to stay in one location rather than migrate large distances like caribou.

"Because they stay put, their large fat stores allow them to tolerate poor feeding conditions in winter," Barboza said.

Caribou and reindeer are the only members of deer family in which antlers grow on females as well as males. Once they start branching, the antlers can grow quite quickly, too.

"When they're growing, they can grow 4 inches a day," said Todd Block, Mary and John's son.

While reindeer meat is still eaten in Alaska, you won't find it on many plates in Minnesota; costs associated with the animals here make them a financially unviable food source, Mary Block said.

"It would be quite an expensive steak," she said.

Those who do keep them in Minnesota often use the animals for Christmas-related appearances. Daryl Simon, owner of Crystal Collection Reindeer in Lake Crystal, Minn., and a board member of the Reindeer Owners and Breeders Association, leases the animals out for displays across the Midwest.

"Everybody is really excited about them," said Simon, who also breeds the animals. "A lot of people have never seen a reindeer."

As with Santa Claus, some people refuse to believe they exist.

"You get people who insist there's no such thing as reindeer, that that's some other kind of animal that you got there," Simon said.

That could have something to do with the reindeer's place in the Christmas tradition and the stories of them taking flight -- tales that date at least as far back as the 1820s.

In 1821, a booklet titled "The Children's Friend" became possibly the first written depiction of a reindeer pulling Santa's sleigh "O'er chimney tops, and tracks of snow/To bring his yearly gifts to you."

Two years later, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" -- commonly known by its first line, "'Twas the night before Christmas" -- was first printed, and the idea was popularized.

One also cannot discredit the role of most famous reindeer of them all. In 1939, copywriter Robert L. May introduced Rudolph's story to the world in a booklet written for Montgomery Ward. A decade later, the reindeer with a glowing nose became a superstar with the success of the Gene Autry-sung tune "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

But as much as the idea of flying reindeer has tickled imaginations for decades, one doesn't need to look up to the sky on Christmas Eve to see their magic -- it can be seen on the faces of people who meet the

animals on the ground, said Sandy Kendall, who has reindeer on her farm near Glencoe, Minn.

"It's a magical thing that makes people smile," she said of the reindeer encounters. "They bring so much joy."

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