



The Deer Of Alaska

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THE DEER OF ALASKA

Of the ten big game animals found in Alaska, four are in the deer family. There are **moose** (*Alces alces*), **elk** (*Cervus canadensis roosevelti*), **caribou** (*Rangifer tarandus*), and **Sitka black-tailed deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis*) found in various habitats of Alaska. Other deer found on the North American continent that are not found in Alaska include: white-tailed deer, mule deer, key deer, and the typical black-tailed deer.

MOOSE (*Alces alces gigas*)

The **moose** (*Alces alces*) is the largest member of the deer family and the moose (*Alces alces gigas*) of Alaska are the largest in the world. The moose is found in many areas of Alaska ranging from the Stikine River in the panhandle to the Colville River on the Arctic Slope. They are most abundant in areas of suitable vegetation such as those areas that have been freshly burned and contain willow and birch shrubs. The color of moose range from a golden brown to nearly black, which depends upon the age of the animal and the season. The breeding season or “rut” peaks in late September and early October. A young cow moose will generally breed after 28 months of age. The calves are born between mid-May and early June after a 230 day gestation period. Cows give birth to twins most commonly and triplets on extremely rare occasions. The newborn calves weigh 28 to 35 pounds, but will grow to over 300 pounds within five months. A male or “bull” moose in his prime will weigh 1200 to 1600 pounds. A female or “cow” moose will weigh between 800 and 1300 pounds. The bull moose is the only sex that has antlers and they can become quite large. The antlers are shed each winter and grow back each spring. The bull moose will rarely produce trophy-size antlers at 6 to 7 years of age, but the largest are usually grown by mature males between 10 and 12 years of age. It is very rare for a moose to live more than 16 years in the wild. Moose antlers are grown in about a four month time span; therefore, the moose antler is one of the fastest growing tissues known to man.



Bull moose with seventy-two inch antler spread
Photo courtesy of American Bald Eagle Foundation

ROOSEVELT ELK or WAPITI (*Cervus canadensis roosevelti*)

The **Roosevelt Elk** (*Cervus canadensis roosevelti*), also known as **Wapiti**, which is taken from a Native American word meaning “white,” is the second largest deer found in Alaska. The Roosevelt elk is not a native species in Alaska, but was introduced in 1929 when eight calves were released on Afognak Island. The population was dispersed to different areas during the twentieth century with the latest transplant taking place in 1986 when elk were moved to Etolin Island, near Petersburg. Transplants to other parts of southeast Alaska, such as Baranof Island, have been mostly unsuccessful. The Roosevelt elk are larger and darker in color with more massive antlers than the Rocky Mountain elk found east of the Cascade Mountains in Canada and the United States. Males or “stags” can reach a shoulder height of five feet and weigh up to 1300 pounds. They can attain an antler spread of five feet, which is almost three feet less than the largest of the moose antler spreads. Elk forage on grasses, twigs, and leaves. The cows and calves graze together in herds during the summer months and the bulls form separate groups. The bulls then disperse and fight for possession of a harem or a number of cows during the mating season. In the fall, the start of the mating season can be recognized by the bugling calls of the bulls. The loud calls signify the start of the rut in which the bulls compete for the cows and sometimes battle to the death. Hunting the Roosevelt elk in Alaska is allowed by permit only. On the islands of Afognak and Raspberry the populations peaked in the 1960’s. After several harsh winters, the calf mortality rate decreased the population considerably and the area was closed to hunting for a few years. The population has since recovered, but is still susceptible to starvation, disease, predation, and hunting. The average life expectancy of a Roosevelt Elk in the wild is between 18 and 22 years.



**Three Roosevelt Elk stags grazing
Picture courtesy of United States Fish & Wildlife Service.**

CARIBOU (*Rangifer tarandus*)

Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) are not as abundant as they once were in Alaska. The great herds have diminished considerably. There are currently 32 herds or mini-populations of caribou in Alaska that bring the number of individual caribou in the state up to 950,000. These herds may occupy or frequent some of the same areas, especially during winter ranging. Caribou do not get as large as the other deer of Alaska such as the moose and elk. The largest males can weigh as much as 700 pounds, however, the average bull only weighs 350-400 and the mature females only weigh 175-225 pounds. A unique characteristic found in the caribou, and not in the moose or elk, is that both sexes grow antlers. The male's antlers are far more impressive and much larger than the females. Caribou live in herds for most of their lives. The migration patterns of the many herds depends on the season. Caribou must continuously move from area to area in order to find adequate food. The mating season for caribou is in the autumn. Calves are often born during a migration trip and are able to keep up with the herd after only a few hours. The herds feed on sedges, grasses, and lichens. During the leanest of the winter months, caribou browse on willow and dwarf birch, but also paw through the snow for buried lichens. A peculiar trait that is unique to caribou is found in the foot. A tendon rubs against bone and produces an audible click that can be heard when the animal runs. This "clicking" sound is more noticeable when the herd is very large. Caribou have been known to live as long as 15 to 17 years of age in the wild, with a good grazing area and without disease, hunting, or predators intervening.



**Mature male caribou grazing.
Photo courtesy of Dean Biggens, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**

SITKA BLACK-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis*)

The **Sitka black-tailed deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis*) is native to the wet coastal rain forests of southeast Alaska and the islands of southeast Alaska and north-coastal British Columbia.. This variety of black-tailed deer is much smaller and stockier with a shorter face than other members of the species. Males or “bucks” usually only attain a weight of about 120 pounds with females or “does” only weighing in around 80 pounds. Fawns are born in early June and weigh about 6 to 8 pounds at birth. The average life expectancy of this deer, the third smallest deer found in North America, is about ten years with a few known to live as long as 15 years. During the summer months the deer disperse and migrate into forest and subalpine habitats to forage on the lush vegetation that will help them attain a fat reserve enabling them to survive the harsh winter. Does, usually breed during their second year of life and continue to breed annually until they reach 10 years of age. Reproductive success varies depending on the severity of the particular winter. Sitka black-tailed deer are able to survive the large snow accumulations of winter by grazing along the coasts and beaches as the tide washes away the fresh snowfall. These deer are hunted with limitations that vary in different areas depending upon the population numbers. In the other species of deer, the “trophy” buck is characterized by the number of tines or “points” on its antlers as well as the spread and size of the rack. The antlers or rack of a normal Sitka black-tailed deer however, only develop three points on each side. The spread, as well as the mass of the antlers, are usually very modest in comparison to the other deer that are hunted for trophy racks.



Buck and Doe Sitka Black-tailed Deer
Photo courtesy of American Bald Eagle Foundation

Alaska



Moose



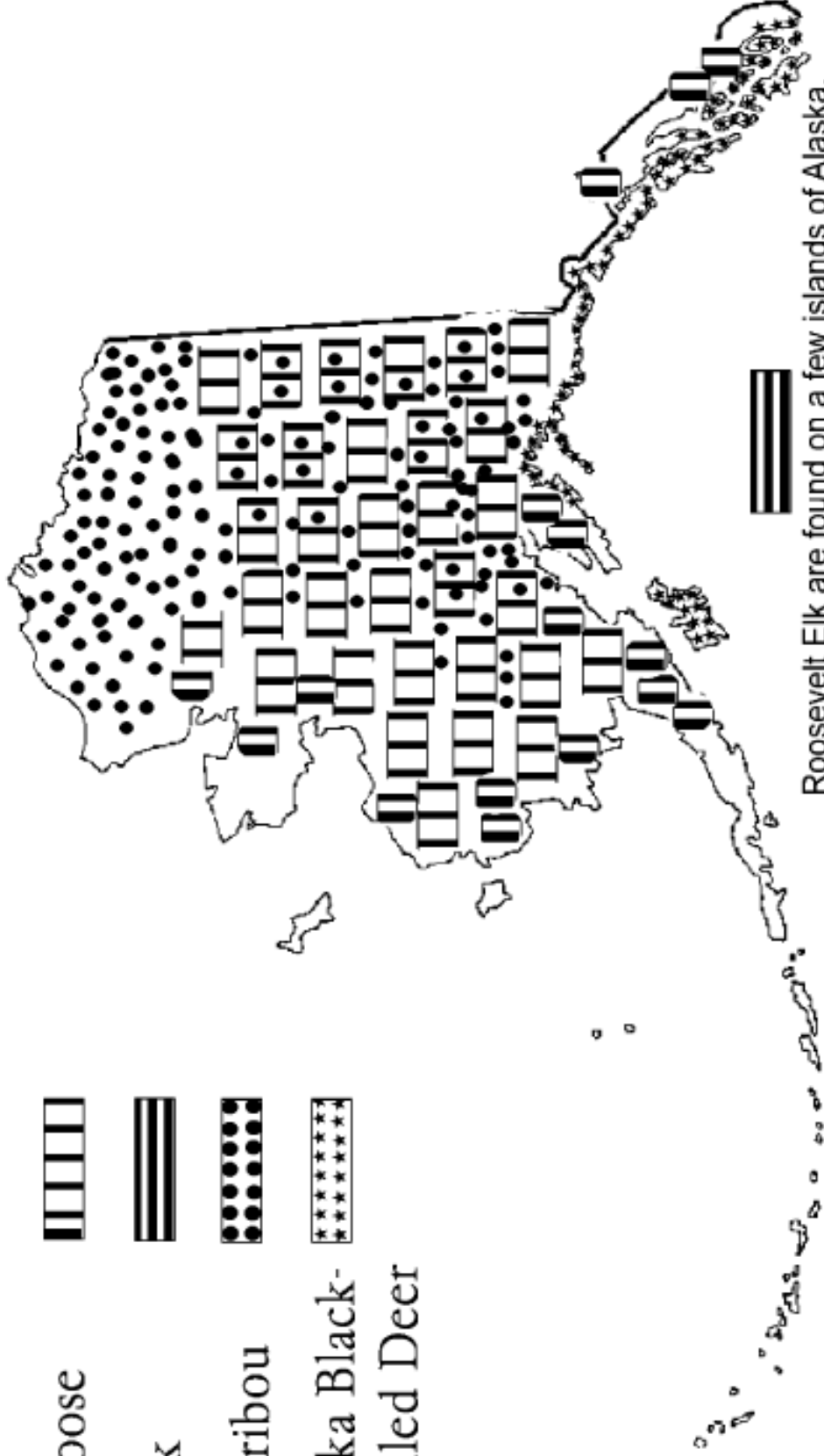
Elk



Caribou



Sitka Black-Tailed Deer



Roosevelt Elk are found on a few islands of Alaska.
Populations exist on Afognak Island in south-central Alaska and on Etolin Island in southeast Alaska. All populations are non-native transplants.

DEER OF ALASKA COMPARATIVE CHART

MOOSE

ROOSEVELT ELK

CARIBOU

SITKA BLACK-
TAILED DEER

SPECIES	<i>Alces alces gigas</i>	<i>Cervus canadensis roosevelti</i>	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>	<i>Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis</i>
SIZE	Bull 1200-1600 lbs Cow 800-1300 lbs	Stag up to 1300 lbs Cow up to 800 lbs	Bull 350-400 lbs Cow 175-225 lbs	Buck 110-125 lbs Doe 75-90 lbs
LIFE EXPECTANCY	Rarely over 16 years	18 to 22 years	15 to 17 years	10 to 12 years
DIET	Most suitable areas are freshly burned regions with willow and birch shrubs	Prefer foraging on grasses, twigs, and leaves	Herds feed on sedges, grasses, and lichens	Prefer sub-alpine habitats and forests with lush vegetation such as grasses and sprouts
FACTS	Largest member of the deer family. The bull moose's antler is the fastest growing tissue known to man. The growing period for antlers is approximately four months with some reaching weights in excess of forty pounds (Making an entire rack weigh more than eighty pounds).	Not native to Alaska, the Roosevelt Elk are also known as Wapiti. The word "Wapiti" is derived from a Native American word meaning "white," which refers to the Elk's rump which is pale in color.	Found most abundantly in the northern parts of the state, caribou travel in herds that once numbered in the several thousands. A unique characteristic only found in the caribou is the "clicking" sound that can be heard when a caribou runs. It is caused by tendon rubbing against bone.	Only found in isolated mainland coastal areas and islands, these deer are the third smallest deer found in North America. With shoulder heights reaching two feet or less, deep snow is a hazard. Survival often comes from grazing beach areas where the snow has been washed away by the tide.

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