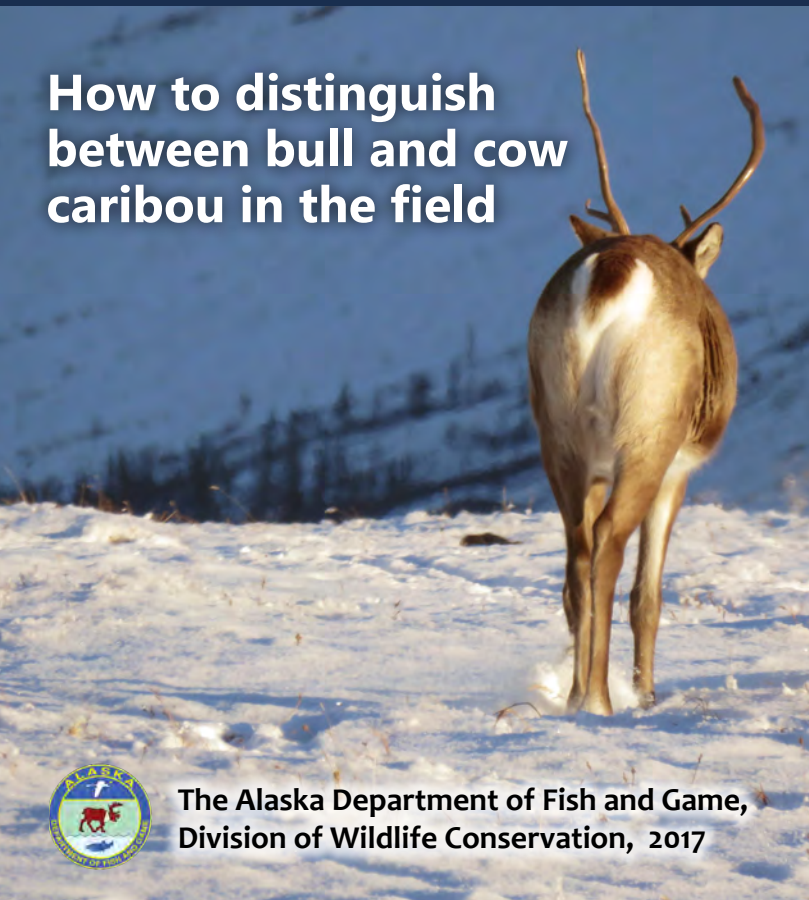


# Bull or Cow?

## How to distinguish between bull and cow caribou in the field

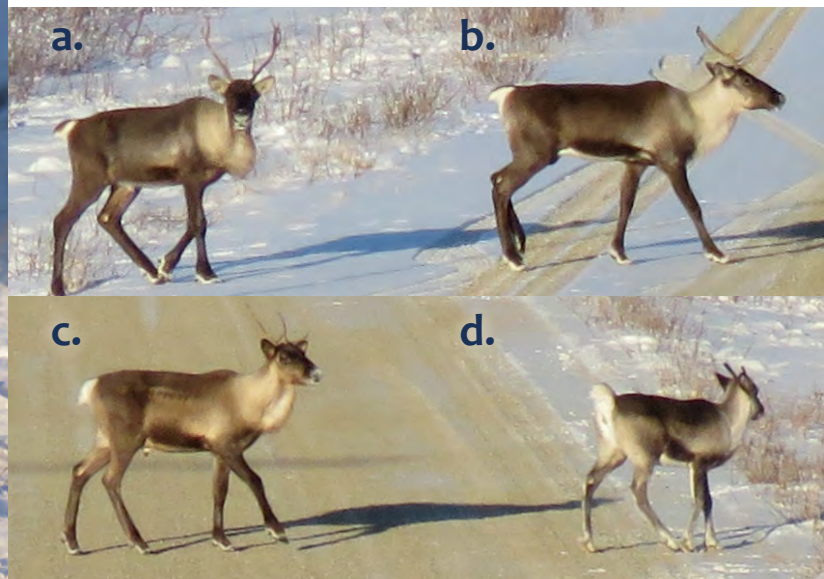


The Alaska Department of Fish and Game,  
Division of Wildlife Conservation, 2017

## Don't rely on antlers to determine the sex of a caribou!

### Before pulling the trigger ask these questions:

1. Does the caribou urinate forward or backward?
2. Are the testicles or penis sheath visible?
3. Is a vulva visible?
4. What is the shape of the white rump patch?



Answers: a. Young bull (penis sheath); b. Cow (no penis sheath); c. Yearling bull (penis sheath); d. Calf (female, vulva). Cover photo is a bull (no vulva, heart-shaped rump patch).

## Why do different herds have different harvest strategies?

Not all caribou herds are the same. Some are growing, a few are relatively stable, while others are in decline. Managers use different harvest strategies depending on the status of the herd. **Check the regulations for restrictions and updates on your specific hunt!**

### Why restrict harvest to bulls?

When a herd is unstable or in decline, restricting harvest to bulls, or mostly bulls, allows more cows to live and produce calves. Over time, this may allow the population to recover.

✓ **Shoot a bull.**



Not as many bulls are needed in a healthy population.

✓ **Let cows live.**



Cows produce calves. Their calves grow into adults and produce more calves.



### When is cow harvest appropriate?

Cow harvest increases hunt opportunity and is allowed in several situations. The most common are listed below:

- If a herd is healthy, stable, or growing it can accommodate a small portion of cow harvest without affecting the population.
- If a herd is reaching an unsustainably high population level managers may increase cow harvest in an attempt to stop herd growth.
- In some declining herds, managers may allow limited cow harvest if the situation is such that there will be minimal impact to the herd. This may be particularly true in areas with reduced access, or where seasonal opportunity to harvest a small number of cows is worth more to hunters than having a potentially larger bull harvest.

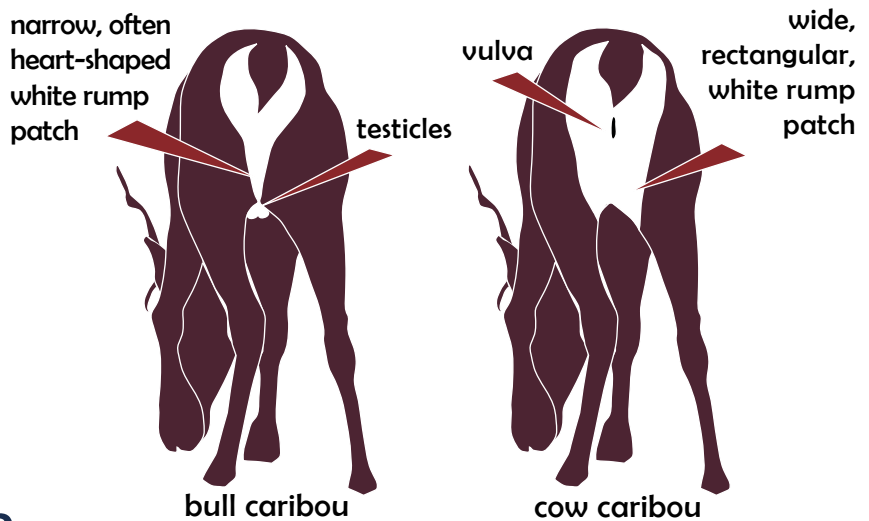
## Why antlers are misleading

Most cows, bulls and calves have antlers for several months during the fall. Large bulls are easily identified by their antlers during this time, but there is significant overlap in the characteristics of young bulls and cows. It is impossible to tell with certainty young bulls from cows by looking only at their antlers!

During the winter and spring, both sexes of caribou drop their antlers, but at different times depending on age and if a cow is pregnant. As a result, using the absence of antlers as a way to judge caribou sex can be misleading. If you are hunting in an area with harvest restrictions, don't risk it. Learn to distinguish between bull and cow caribou using characteristics other than antlers.

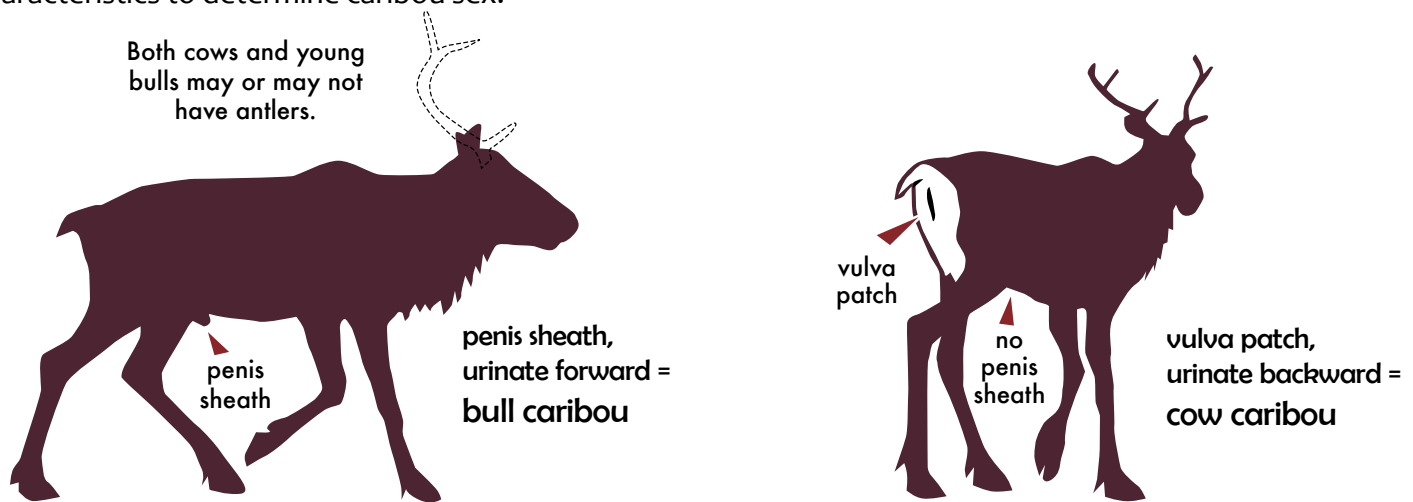
## Views from behind

When viewing caribou from behind, check the shape of the white rump patch. Look for the dark vulva on cows or testicles on bulls. Keep in mind that during June and July bulls can shed in patterns that resemble a vulva. The udder on a cow can also look like the testicles on a bull.



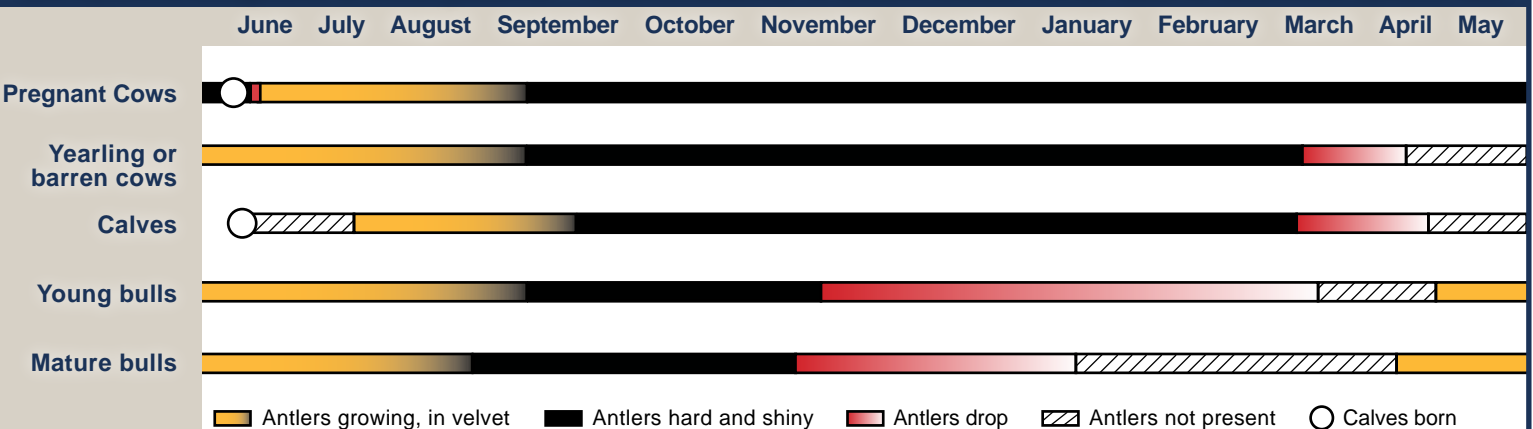
## Viewing caribou broadside

It is difficult to distinguish between bulls and cows when viewing caribou broadside. Without seeing a caribou urinate, the only reliable clue is the presence of a penis sheath. Even so, on small bulls the penis sheath can be difficult to see. Similarly, the long winter coat on cows can resemble a penis sheath. It is best to use a combination of characteristics to determine caribou sex.



## When do caribou usually drop their antlers?

\*This is a simplified illustration to represent most caribou in Alaska. Keep in mind that each herd is different and there are ALWAYS exceptions to these patterns. Presence/absence of antlers should not be used to determine caribou sex.



# Fall

## Calves

- Harvesting calves is illegal in some areas.
- A calf is any caribou under 1 year of age.
- Calves have smaller bodies and shorter faces than adults.
- During the fall calves can have no antlers or spiked antlers with no branching.
- Calves are not always accompanied by a cow.



*Likely a cow. No penis sheath visible, but remember, the penis sheath on small bulls can be difficult to see.*

*Calf. Small body, short face, tiny antlers. In this case, accompanied by a cow.*

## Cows

- By mid to late fall most adult cows have hard antlers.
- A few cows will not grow antlers at all.
- Mature cows may have larger antlers than young bulls.
- In some herds (e.g. Mulchatna) the vulva is typically furred. Rather than appearing as a dark patch, it is similar in color but irregular or “flat” shaped.



*Wait for a better view to determine sex before shooting.*

*Cow. Wide rump patch. Sometimes the vulva is not as dark as you would expect.*

## Bulls

- All bulls should have antlers in early fall.
- Big bulls start to drop their antlers during November.
- Massive bulls are the only caribou where antler size can be used to determine sex.
- For all other caribou look for the sex organs before shooting.



*Younger bull. Penis sheath.*



*Bull. No vulva. Narrow rump patch. Testicles.*

# Winter

## Calves

- By winter, calf antlers are larger and often spiked.
- Even as calves grow bigger, they depend on their mothers for survival until mid winter.



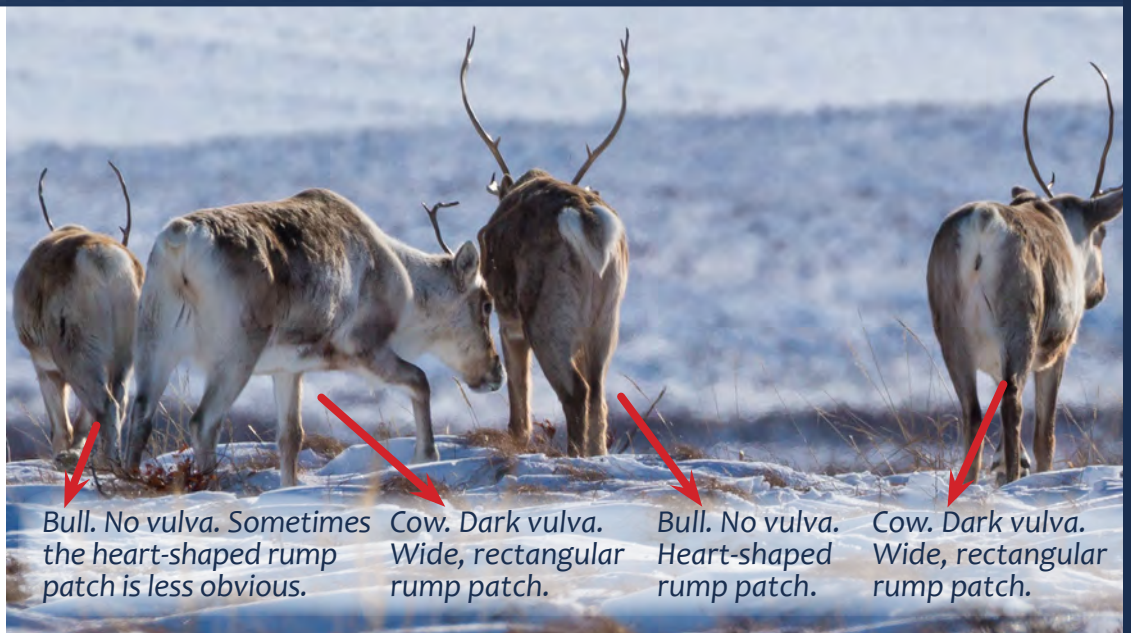
*Calf. Small body and antlers. Likely female, dark vulva.*

*Cow. Vulva just visible. Some cows have longer manes and look more bull-like.*

*Bull. Penis sheath.*

## Cows

- Pregnant cows can keep their antlers until after calving in late May to early June.
- Just because a caribou has antlers during the winter does not make it a cow.
- Some young bulls keep their antlers late into the spring.
- Like bulls, many mature cows have gray or white manes.



*Bull. No vulva. Sometimes the heart-shaped rump patch is less obvious.*

*Cow. Dark vulva. Wide, rectangular rump patch.*

*Bull. No vulva. Heart-shaped rump patch.*

*Cow. Dark vulva. Wide, rectangular rump patch.*

## Bulls

- Mature bulls usually drop their antlers in November or December.
- Young bulls can keep their antlers through March.
- Just because you see a caribou in March without antlers does not make it a bull.
- Barren cows can drop their antlers during March too.



*Antlerless bull. Penis sheath.*

*Young bull. Penis sheath.*