



Herds of muskoxen have been established at five locations in western and northern Alaska.

FACTS ABOUT MUSKOXEN

by Tim Smith

The Inupiaq Eskimo call him "omingmak," the animal with skin like a beard, a name more accurate than muskox. He has a shaggy, bearded appearance, but, despite his English name, no noticeable musky odor.

The muskox, *Ovibos moschatus*, is a stocky, long-haired animal with a slight shoulder hump and a very short tail that is hidden by his hair. Taxonomists classify him with sheep and goats, and his closest living relative is the takin of the Himalayas.

Both sexes have horns, but the bulls' are larger and heavier than those of cows and develop large bases that span nearly the entire forehead. The pelage consists of long, coarse, outer hair and a short, fine underhair. In Alaska, muskoxen are generally dark brown with creamy patches of hair on the saddle, forehead, and legs. Mature bulls stand five feet at the shoulder and weigh about 700 lbs. Cows average about four feet at the shoulder and weigh about 450 lbs.

The breeding season begins during late summer. Battles between bulls during the rut are spectacular and violent. After aggressive displays, competing bulls charge from distances of 50 yards and collide squarely on the horn bases. After a clash, the bulls back away from each other, swinging their heads from side to side, and repeat the behavior until one bull turns and runs. Battles sometimes last through 20 clashes. Analysis of motion picture footage shows that the force generated in a clash is equivalent to that of an automobile ramming a concrete wall at 17 mph. Fortunately, the bulls' heads are heavily armored. Four inches of horn and three inches of bone lie directly over the brain in the area of contact.

Mating occurs in September. Single calves, weighing about 30 lbs., are born the following April or May. Growth is rapid. As yearlings, the calves weigh 150 to 235 lbs.

Muskoxen are gregarious animals and are seldom seen alone except during the rut. Winter herds may include up to 75 animals. Harem groups that form during the mating season range from five to 15 females and sub-adults and one dominant

bull. Bulls excluded from breeding herds wander widely in search of a harem.

Muskoxen eat a great variety of plants, including various grasses, sedges, forbs, and woody plants. They are poorly adapted for digging through heavy snow for food, so their winter habitat is generally restricted to areas with shallow snow accumulations or areas blown free of snow.

When predators approach, muskoxen run to each other and back against their neighbor. Every animal tries to face the source of the threat. If one predator is nearby, they form a line. If several predators surround the group, as with a wolf pack, the formation becomes a tight circle with the muskoxen facing outward. Occasionally, one animal will charge out to attack or threaten the predator. The muskox's defensive strategy is extremely effective against its principal enemy, the wolf. Unless the herd stampedes, it is nearly invulnerable to wolf attack. Primitive human hunters soon learned to exploit this defensive behavior and, with the aid of dogs, were able to wipe out whole herds of muskoxen. Whalers and arctic explorers, using the same technique, took a heavy toll.

The soft, brownish, woolly underhair, which is shed by muskoxen in the spring, has been called the rarest fiber in the world. Yarn spun from muskox wool is made into gloves, scarves, hats, and sweaters by knitters in a number of Alaskan villages and marketed by a cooperative. Most of the fiber used in this way comes from the captive muskox herd at Unalakleet, but Eskimos on Nunivak Island collect the wool that clings to bushes and tundra plants and spin it by hand.

Muskoxen may be hunted under a limited permit system on Nunivak Island, Nelson Island, and in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Muskox meat is highly esteemed among those who have tried it. This hardy survivor of the ice ages is an attraction for tourists, photographers, and students of wildlife. ■

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