

MUSKOX

in Alaska



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Description



 *Muskox Habitat*

The muskox is a stocky, long-haired mammal that was abundant in Alaska during the ice ages. Mature bulls are about five feet high at the shoulder and weigh 600 to 800 pounds. Cows are smaller, standing about four feet high and weighing 400 to 500 pounds.

Muskoxen have dark brown, coarse guard hairs that reach nearly to the ground and shed rain and snow. They have an innercoat of fine, soft, light brown hair that is so dense that neither cold nor frost can penetrate it. Their neck, legs and tail are short, and they have a slight shoulder hump. Both sexes have broad horns that curve down and outward and nearly meet in the middle of the skull. The muskoxen found in Alaska generally have cream-colored hair on the "saddle," forehead and legs. Muskoxen get their name from a characteristic odor that emanates from males during the rut.

Habitat



Brad Palach

Roughly 2,000 to 3,000 muskoxen live in Alaska. They dwell exclusively in arctic tundra, preferring moist habitats, such as river valleys, lake shores and meadows, in the summer and windswept hilltops, slopes and plateaus in the winter.



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The soft underhair of the muskox, called qiviut, is considered one of the rarest fibers in the world. Eskimos on Nunivak Island collect naturally shed qiviut and knit valuable scarves, hats and mittens.

Muskoxen have changed little since the ice age and are perfectly adapted to live in the harsh arctic environment. Their closest living relative is the takin, a large goat-like animal found in the Himalayas.

Life History

Muskoxen breed from August to October. Single calves, weighing 22 to 31 pounds, are born in the spring to cows older than two years. Growth is rapid and the animals weigh 150 to 235 pounds as yearlings.

Muskoxen are gregarious animals. Winter herds may include up to 75 animals. During the summer rut, a dominant bull drives the other males away and takes charge of the herd. Battles between bull muskoxen during the rut are spectacular and violent contests. Bulls charge one another at top speed from distances of 50 yards or more and collide squarely on the horn bases. The sound of the impact can often be heard a mile away. A battle may include 20 clashes.

When approached by an enemy, the members of a herd bunch together, often in the form of a circle or semicircle with the calves inside. Such a formation provides effective defense against wolves, but has allowed entire herds to be easily killed by human hunters equipped with modern firearms.

Muskoxen eat a wide variety of plants, including grasses, sedges, forbs and woody plants. They are poorly adapted for digging through the snow for food, so their winter habitat is generally restricted to areas with shallow snow accumulation or windblown areas.

Although muskoxen may appear to be clumsy and slow, they can move with surprising agility and speed.

Conservation

Many people don't know how close muskoxen came to following other Alaskan wildlife species, such as mammoths, into the black void of extinction. Alaska's original muskox population disappeared in the mid or late 1800s. Overhunting likely contributed to their demise. By the 1920s, muskoxen existed only in arctic Canada and eastern Greenland where a high take by hunters continued. Concern over the impending extinction of the species led to a move to restore a protected population in Alaska. In 1930, 34 muskoxen captured in Greenland were brought to Fairbanks. They were eventually released on Nunivak Island, where they have thrived. Since then, muskoxen from Nunivak have been relocated to five areas they formerly occupied in Alaska.

Management

State biologists monitor the health of Alaska's muskox populations by tracking herd size and the ratio of bulls to cows and cows to calves. Although muskoxen were once severely reduced in numbers and distribution, their habitat has remained largely unchanged and the potential for future expansion is great. Given support and proper management, muskoxen may become a familiar wildlife species in Alaska.

Hunting of muskoxen under a limited permit system is conducted on Nunivak and Nelson islands, the Seward Peninsula, and in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Muskox meat is highly valued among those who have tried it. Muskoxen are also considered a unique and valuable trophy, and are an important attraction to tourists, photographers, and wildlife researchers.

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The muskox is called "omingmak" meaning "the animal with skin like a beard" by Inupiaq-speaking Eskimos, a reference to their long hair that hangs nearly to the ground.

Dollars for Wildlife

Each year, hunters pay a 10 to 11% federal excise tax on the purchase of firearms, ammunition and archery equipment. These funds are distributed to the states for wildlife conservation programs. Since this system was created in 1937, Alaska has received more than \$108 million in revenue from the tax on hunting equipment. This critical source of funding, called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program, provides roughly half of the state's wildlife management budget, including about \$63,000 a year for muskox research and management. In addition, all proceeds from the sale of hunting and trapping licenses support research and management programs. License and tag sales generate more than \$5 million annually.

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