

Reindeer: have sweet tooth, easy to handle, will travel

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Image: Genuine Christmas reindeer, like these two females don't mind a sugar hit. Photo: Gordon Dryden

Children who leave sweet treats out for Santa and his reindeer this Christmas are not too far off the culinary mark for a reindeer's dietary requirements.

University of Queensland deer expert Dr Gordon Dryden said reindeer were fussy eaters and preferred sweet grasses over the finest hay.

“They seem to have a requirement for a rather low fibre, high soluble sugar feed even though they are animals that graze,” Dr Dryden said.

Dr Dryden, a Senior Lecturer in Animal Nutrition from UQ's School of

Animal Studies, said another reindeer delicacy was a spongy grey moss from Norway.

Luckily, most reindeer prefer to dine early evening which is handy for all the children who will leave out cookies, chocolate and lollies on Saturday night.

“The animals in our Finland study tended to graze in the early evening and spend a lot of the rest of the time just lying down and not doing much.”

Dr Dryden said most reindeer were about 1.3 metres tall and weighed about 60 kilograms.

“The real Arctic reindeer look a bit funny with their short legs and big noses - just like Rudolph!”

He said Australia was mostly too hot for reindeer as temperatures of 20 degrees could cause heat stress.

Dr Dryden has studied the behaviours and eating habits of reindeer in Finland and Norway.

Collaborating with Nordic researchers, he has shown how reindeer slow down as the northern winter approaches.

He said reindeer females and fawns were active in summer, but spent less time grazing as winter set in. The fawns were more active and played a lot.

As far as the strength and flying abilities of Santa's reindeer Donner, Cupid, Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Comet, Blitzen, Vixen and Rudolph, Dr Dryden said female reindeer stockpile energy, especially when pregnant,

so that they can survive the long Arctic winters.

Some of Santa's reindeer team could be females because reindeer are the only deer species where the females have antlers.

Reindeer herders in Scandinavia catch their animals with lassoes. Dr. Dryden's team used the same method to catch reindeer in paddocks on abandoned coastal farms in northern Norway.

“Reindeers are quite easy to handle actually. When we worked in the research station on the mainland they were almost like sheep,” he said.

Dr Dryden said there were hundreds of thousands of reindeer throughout the Arctic in Canada, Scandinavia and Russia.

Next year he hopes to publish his latest reindeer behaviour research in collaboration with a Finnish researcher in the international reindeer journal *Rangifer*.

Source: University of Queensland

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