

Finnish phone app finds reindeer, helps to avoid road kill

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In this July 13, 2009 photo, reindeer walk across the road in Suomussalmi, Finland. There's good news for Rudolph and his friends—an app is helping officials reduce the number of reindeer killed in traffic accidents in Finland. A simple, one-button interface allows drivers to tap their smartphone screens to register any reindeer spotted near roads. Using GPS technology, it creates a 1.5-kilometer (1-mile) warning zone that lasts for an hour and warns other app users approaching the area. (Vesa Moilanen/ Lehtikuva via AP)

There's good news for Rudolph and his friends—an app is helping officials reduce the number of reindeer killed in traffic accidents in Finland.

Some 300,000 reindeer freely wander the wilds of Lapland in Arctic Finland. An estimated 4,000 are killed every year through road accidents, officials say, and compensation to reindeer herders can be expensive.

Most of the accidents occur during the dark winter months when the animals are hard to spot. Several methods to cut roadkill have failed, including spray-painting antlers with fluorescent colors, hanging reflectors on reindeer necks and using movable traffic signs to warn of reindeer as they wander through the lichen-covered fells.

In their latest attempt, officials are using a [smartphone app](#) called "Porokello," Finnish for "Reindeer Bell."

And it seems to be working—at least last month, when there were 300 less reindeer accidents on the roads of Finnish Lapland compared to the same month in 2015. According to Jaakko Ylinampa, head of a local business center in Rovaniemi, the biggest town in Lapland near the Arctic Circle, the app helps cut costs for herders.

A simple, one-button interface allows drivers to tap their smartphone screens to register any reindeer spotted near roads. Using GPS technology, it creates a 1.5-kilometer (1-mile) warning zone that lasts for an hour and warns other app users approaching the area.

"If there are reindeer, (drivers) reduce speed," Ylinampa said. "When they have passed the warning place, then they can get back to the normal speed again."

Reindeer often wander onto roads that cut across grazing grounds rather than plowing through the deep snow, said Anna-Leena Jankala, whose family has a reindeer farm in Narkaus, 40 kilometers (25 miles) south of Rovaniemi.

When female reindeer are killed, it can be particularly damaging to herders, setting them back years despite government compensation.



In this photo taken June 10, 2012, a reindeer walks on the road, in Ranua, Finland. There's good news for Rudolph and his friends—an app is helping officials reduce the number of reindeer killed in traffic accidents in Finland. A simple, one-button interface allows drivers to tap their smartphone screens to register any reindeer spotted near roads. Using GPS technology, it creates a 1.5-kilometer (1-mile) warning zone that lasts for an hour and warns other app users approaching the area. (Martti Kainulainen/ Lehtikuva via AP)

"In practice, it's not possible to buy a similar reindeer, you need to raise

it," Jankala said.

It's hard to gauge the success of the pilot project that started in June with 1,000 free, app-loaded smartphones delivered to professional drivers, including heavy vehicles, taxis and buses, but those using it at least have a good warning system, says Maria Timo-Huhtala, who helped develop the app.

Driving along an icy Lappish road, she looks checks her phone when a warning alerts her.

"We know that we are in the area where reindeer (have) been seen in the past one hour," she said. "So now we know to be cautious and look more carefully."

This time the reindeer, which are bred for their meat, milk and fur, have moved on.

Timo-Huhtala emphasizes that drivers shouldn't become too reliant on the app.

"It's important for the drivers to understand that there might a [reindeer](#) even if there is not a warning," Timo-Huhtala said. "We have quite well covered the roads in Lapland with the system, but it's still not 100 percent."

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