



Status and trends Arctic Island wild reindeer and caribou: 2026 update

The arctic islands are a demanding and severe environment and Rangifer have adapted with reduced body size and proportionally shorter legs and faces. The level of adaptation has led to differentiation at the sub-species level (*R. t. platyrhynchus* and *R.t. pearsoni*). Wild reindeer from the Russian mainland likely island hopped and colonized Novaya Zemlya, Franz Josef Land and Svalbard as recently as 9000–6000 years BP when ice sheets retreated. The Canadian Arctic islands were colonized from the west and local adaptations resulted in both Peary caribou and the Dolphin and Union caribou (Victoria Island. In 2023, SARC NWT re-assessed Dolphin and Union as Endangered. In the NWT (2022) and nationally (2015), Peary caribou are assessed as Threatened. The Norwegian Red List for Species 2021 assessed the Svalbard reindeer as *Least concern* (LC) while *R. t. pearsoni* (population of Severny Island, Novaya Zemlya), included in the Red Data Book of the Russian Federation and classified as Category 3 facing the threat of extinction.

Arctic island caribou (wild reindeer) undergo periodic declines during severe winters followed by recoveries although the longer-term trend since the 1960s is an overall decline in abundance (except on Svalbard where Svalbard wild reindeer are undergoing a long-term recovery since 1925 after over-hunting. *R. t. platyrhynchus* are periodically and comprehensively surveyed to estimate overall numbers and the most recent survey in 2019 estimated 22,000. Three regions are also annually monitored for wild reindeer abundance. Higher temperatures with shallow snow in October have resulted in higher body weight in the following year and thus increased reproduction supported by the longer warmer summers and increased plant growth. But regional variation as however, the Nordenskiöld Land population has more difficult winters (rain and/or a lot of snow) and numbers declined but by 2025, stabilised.

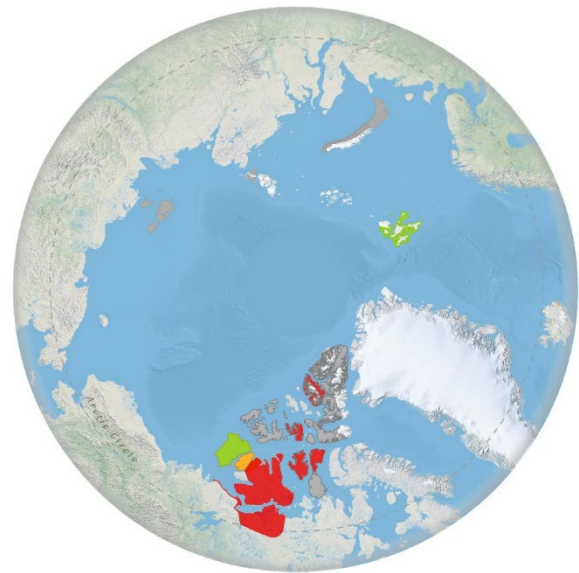


Figure 1. Arctic Island Rangifer

Svalbard	Region		Count
	Brøggerhalvøya	2025	158
	Reindalen	2025	1494
	Adventdalen	2025	1348

Russia has five islands and island groups with wild or feral reindeer. The Novaya Zemlya Archipelago’s Yuzhny Island has had between 5-19,000 feral reindeer. *R.t. pearsoni* on Severny Island although not recent numbers are not available as the island is not formally surveyed. Wild reindeer likely occupied Franz Josef Land c. >6400 and 1300 cal. BP. Based on radiocarbon dated antlers. A glacial advance c. 1000 cal. BP likely led to their extinction and they have not recolonized the islands. Reindeer are recorded on Severnaya Zemlya although it is mostly glaciated. Historically the New Siberian Islands had as many as 30,000 reindeer during the 19th century. The reindeer by 1964 had declined to 17,000–18,000 and declined further as there are no recent reports. Domestic Chukchi reindeer were introduced in the mid-20th century to Wrangel Island. They rapidly increased to 6000 by 1979, followed by a sharp decline rapid recovery to again peak by 2002 at 8,500 individuals but an ice crust and deep snow cover in the winter of 2004-2005 caused reindeer deaths and the last sightings were 2018.

The status of Peary caribou in 2024, was 11,905 mature individuals compared to 13,200 in 2015 and 5,400 mature individuals estimated in 1996. The 1996 estimate was a decline from 22,000 Peary caribou estimated in 1987 and

historically, the 50,000 Peary Caribou in the early 1960s. Within the longer-term historic decline, island-specific collapses on the western and eastern Queen Elizabeth Islands are infrequent and are followed by recoveries. On the larger and more southern Arctic Islands, the trends have been for lower but persistent declines with no recovery recorded for Prince of Wales and Somerset Islands since 1995. Trends within three generations (27 years 1999-2026) are calculated based on the exponential rate of change (r) when there were at least three estimates of caribou numbers. The current trend for Banks is an increase (r=) while northwest Victoria is declining at a low rate (r). The Dolphin and Union herd also on Victoria Island is rapidly declining (r). The Peary caribou on the Bathurst Island complex illustrate the difficulty of assigning trends when survey frequency is low. The caribou were recovering from a weather-caused decline in the early 1990s and had increased from 78 (29SE) in 1997 to 1482 (CI 387) by 2013. However, the next survey in 2021 reported 318 caribou (r=0.011).

Region			Most recent Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	Trend 1999-2026 (r)
Southwest	Banks	2024	4,776	406	0.077
	Northwest Victoria	2024	182	136	-0.006
Southeast	Boothia Peninsula	2006	1	-	
	Prince of Wales	2016	0	-	
	Somerset	2018	0	-	
Northeast	Axel Heiberg	2019	-	6 caribou counted	
	Ellesmere	2015	819	128	
	Devon	2008	17		
	Cornwallis	2021	2		
Northwest	Melville	2012	2,728	267	
	Prince Patrick	2012	2,708	855	
	Eglinton	2012	181	134	
	Emerald	2012	46	78	
	Byam Martin	2012	119	73	
	Bordan			-	
	Brock			-	
	Bathurst complex	2021	318	271	
Southcentral	Dolphin and Union	2020	3815	1017	=-0.033

Species at Risk Committee. 2023. Species Status Report for Dolphin and Union Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus x pearyi*) in the Northwest Territories. Species at Risk Committee, Yellowknife, NT.

Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2021. Recovery Strategy for the Peary 3 Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus pearyi*) in Canada. *Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy 4 Series*. Environment and Climate Change Canada, Ottawa. xii + 86 pp.

Norwegian Polar Institute (2025). Reindeer population size, Adventdalen. *Environmental monitoring of Svalbard and Jan Mayen (MOSJ)*. URL: <https://mosj.no/en/indikator/fauna/terrestrial-fauna/svalbard-reindeer/>

Mizin, I.A., Sipko, T.P., Davydov, A.V. and Gruzdev, A.R., 2018. The wild reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*: Cervidae, Mammalia) on the arctic islands of Russia: a review. *Nature Conservation Research. Заповедная наука*, 3(3), pp.1-14.

Hold, K., Lord, E., Brealey, J.C., Le Moullec, M., Bieker, V.C., Ellegaard, M.R., Rasmussen, J.A., Kellner, F.L., Guschanski, K., Yannic, G. and Røed, K.H., 2024. Ancient reindeer mitogenomes reveal island-hopping colonisation of the Arctic archipelagos. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), p.4143.

Forman, S.L., Lubinski, D. and Weihe, R.R., 2000. The Holocene occurrence of reindeer on Franz Josef land, Russia. *The Holocene*, 10(6), pp.763-768.

The trends were prepared from data supplied by wildlife management agencies and special thanks to Tracy Davison, Åshild Pedersen and Ivan Mizin. A source list is available on request.

Anne Gunn
May 2026