



MUSKOX

Ovibos moschatus



Appearance

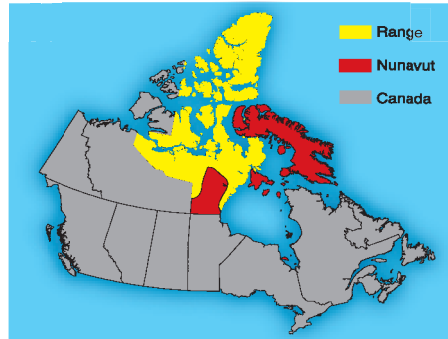
A muskox looks like a great shaggy ox but actually has more in common with a sheep or goat. The skull of the muskox is massive. They have large, sweeping horns that vary in colour from pale in the young to shades of brown in adults. An under-layer of short fine wool called 'qiviut' covers everything except the horns, lips, nose and hooves. A much longer outer coat made up of shaggy hair up to 62cm long covers the muskox and makes it easy to recognize. The body colour is dark brown to black, with some cream coloured hairs on the back and around its feet. Females are usually 2m in length and weigh between 280 and 295kg. Males are generally 2 to 2.5m in length and weigh between 260 and 660kg. Rounded hooves with sharp rims provide traction on ice and rocky surfaces.

Food And Feeding

Muskoxen are herbivores and feed on willow, tundra grasses, forbs and seeds.

Behaviour

Muskoxen are social animals and live in herds with an average of 15 animals. There is one dominant bull per herd which leads the herd in short migrations and when danger threatens. In all-cow herds, there is a cow leader that shows similar behaviour to the dominant bull. When threatened by wolves, muskoxen try to move to higher ground where the dominant bull stops and faces the danger while the rest of the herd gather around him and form a characteristic line of defense. The young calves stay behind the adults. If the animals stay together, the intruder will most likely give up and look for easier prey. Unlike caribou, muskoxen do not undertake long migrations, but in some areas they may have winter and summer ranges that are up to 160km apart.



Range

Muskox occur primarily on the arctic islands in the Baffin and northern Kitikmeot regions.

Habitat

Muskoxen live in the arctic tundra and can be found in river val-

leys, lakeshores and seepage meadows during the summer. In the winter, they shift to hilltops, slopes and plateaus where the winds blow the underlying vegetation free of snow.

Reproduction

During the breeding season, also known as the rutting season, the lead bull must always defend his position. Bulls challenge each other for the leadership of the herds and the right to mate with the females. Rutting peaks in the late summer and continues into September. After a gestation period of 8 to 9 months, usually only a single calf is born, twins are rare. The calf stays close to its mother and within the safety of the herd for the first few weeks. As it grows, it moves around the herd's feeding area playing with other calves. Whether a cow has a calf every year or in alternate years depends on geographic location and availability of food. In the higher arctic islands the calf may feed from its mother for 15 to 18 months before being weaned.

Status Survival and Management

According to the Nunavut Wild Species 2000 report, the current status of muskoxen is secure. They can live up to 20 or 25 years in the wild. Their predators in Nunavut include humans and some carnivores, primarily the wolf. Their numbers dropped dramatically due to over hunting at the turn of the 19th century. In 1917 the Canadian Government prohibited trading hides and put muskoxen under complete protection. Since that time, their numbers have increased and hunting is allowed. A sustainable harvest is maintained through a quota system.

Did You Know?

Muskoxen can and will swim to evade wolves or simply to cross a river. Some Inuit refer to them as 'oomingmak,' which means the bearded one.

