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Santa's Hooved Helpers

As Christmas draws near and children are anxiously awaiting hearing the clip-clop sound of Reindeer hooves on the roof, signaling the arrival of Santa, here are a few facts about Reindeer to help pass the time.

Living in parts of the world known for their cold temperatures and abundant snow, it is essential to have a lot of hair to stay warm. The haircoat of Reindeer is not like that of our local White-tailed deer; a Reindeer's coat has two types of hairs: long, coarse guard hair that have a hollow core and very fine wool hairs that are very dense. These two types of hair work together to form a thick insulation that traps air between the hairs, creating high-quality insulation that prevents heat loss. This insulation works so well that Reindeer can lie down on snow and rest comfortably for long periods while they wait for Santa to deliver presents.

In addition to their special hair coat, Reindeer have wider hooves and dewclaws than White-tailed deer. These wider hooves act as snowshoes, making it easier for Reindeer to travel through deep snow. Because food is harder to access when there is snow on the ground, Reindeer use their hooves as a shovel to dig through the snow to find food. Reindeer also have hair on their hooves that extends across the pad of the hoof. Researchers believe that these hairs help them maintain better control of their hooves, preventing slipping on snow or ice.

Speaking of snow, Reindeer often live (or travel) where the only source of water available in the winter is snow, and while some animals are not able to stay hydrated by eating snow, Reindeer are able to eat snow to stay hydrated and actually prefer fresh, pure snow over water. And when it comes to traveling, it isn't known how fast Reindeer can fly, but we do know they can swim five miles per hour and run ten miles per hour.

Now, let's talk about antlers. While only male White-tailed deer have antlers, both male (bucks) and female (cows) Reindeer have antlers. Male Reindeer usually lose their antlers around December, while females that are pregnant don't lose theirs until after they give birth, and nonpregnant females won't lose theirs until the spring. This means that female Reindeer pull Santa's sleigh!

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