

Tough Winter Takes a Toll on St. Paul's Reindeer

As the Pribilof Island of St. Paul slowly emerges from a brutal winter, it's becoming clear how much damage the weather did to the island's reindeer herd. KUCB's Stephanie Joyce reports that there might be some tough times ahead for locals who rely on the animals for meat.

It's a typically cold and windy day on St. Paul when I head out with amateur photographer Dave Childers to find the reindeer herd. People have told me they're not doing well, but I want to see for myself.

"Childers: See 'em? Right there. Just to the right of the big cliff?" [fade under]

We're near the salt lake just north of town. It's one of the few spots on the island without heavy snow drifts.

[Fade up audio] "Me: So which direction do we want to approach from?

Childers: I'm thinking if we go down this way, we'll be downwind of them, less chance of them smelling us."

As we circle around to the right, I'm so focused on the herd that I almost miss the reindeer carcass.

"Childers: That's one that was probably starved to death this winter."

What's left of the carcass is strewn across the tundra between patches of snow. The birds and foxes have clearly been here before us.

[ambi fade under]

Although we don't see any other dead reindeer, there are likely dozens, if not hundreds more spread out over the island. At the beginning of the winter there were more than 500 animals in the herd. A preliminary count this spring put the current number at less than a quarter of that. But Phil Zavadil, the tribal government's ecosystem conservation director, hopes to find more in parts of the island that are inaccessible because of snow.

"The plan is, when the snow melts a little bit but before the grass starts to grow up, is to get out there and do a count of carcasses, to find out how many might actually have died."

In the meantime, Zavadil is contemplating what a large die-off might mean for management of the herd.

"When we have a lot of them, we encourage people to go out and hunt so we keep that herd size down, but now we might be on the opposite end of having to limit how much hunting goes on."

The St. Paul tribal government has been managing the reindeer herd since the 80s, although the animals were first introduced much earlier, around the turn of the century. The original idea was that the reindeer would supplement more traditional foods like fur seal and sea birds, but over time they've become as important for many residents.

Richard Zacarof runs a small reindeer meat business on the island. He hunts the deer, quarters them, and then ships them off to Anchorage for processing and distribution.

"This year I only dropped eight animals due to the factors of weather, elements, snow."

Zacarof wouldn't say how much money he made off of the harvest, but he did say it's a significant part of his annual income. All the same, he was mostly concerned about how a large die-off could affect local residents, who rely on the reindeer for affordable meat in a place where ground beef costs \$7 a pound.

"Anything we can subsidize our community with, such as subsistence foods, is very important, critical, to our community."

Back out on the tundra, Childers and I have managed to sneak our way, unseen, onto a cliff. About 40 reindeer are grazing beneath us.

"Me: That one seems to be trailing behind all the time."

"Childers: I don't know whether it's sick or old or whether it just likes the view from the rear. But you're right, it does. Even yesterday when I was out here that one seemed to be behind. It's really noticeable because it's all white and no antlers at all. It might be an old cow and this just may be her last year."

The rest of the reindeer don't look great either - they're skinny and we don't spot the baby that was with the group the day before.

"Childers: "There has to be another herd, or they're in real bad shape."

If that's the case, the same holds true for the people who depend on the reindeer for food. The tribal government is planning another count next month.

Reporting in St. Paul, I'm Stephanie Joyce.