

Addressing concerns regarding the welfare of the Cairngorm Reindeer when out on public events

Each year in November and December, a number of our reindeer travel across the country to take part in public events, where they may be on display or take part in a parade pulling a sleigh. Whilst most members of the public are just delighted to see live reindeer in their town, some people rightly wonder about the welfare of the animals and want to check that they are content and well cared for. We are confident that our reindeer are happy in their work and are kept in the best conditions, and would like to take this opportunity to explain why.

2. Purpose of these guidelines

The RSPCA has published guidelines relating to the use of animals in performance, which mostly relate to the use in film, but also partially apply to live events. Whilst these guidelines are purely voluntary, and apply to England and Wales rather than Scotland, we would like to highlight how we meet and exceed these when taking our reindeer out on public events. Below we have addressed each relevant numbered point.

3. Legal implications of using animals

There is little relevant or specific legislation relating to using reindeer for public parades, and most of it isn't law in Scotland. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 requires a duty of care for keepers to provide for the needs of animals, providing suitable food, water, companionship and housing, preventing pain, injury, suffering and disease, and allowing freedom to express natural behaviours. Whenever our reindeer are out on tour, they are accompanied by herders who look after them year round and the comfort, happiness and well-being of the reindeer is paramount. Our reindeer have access to water at all times, and we carry specially mixed dry feed and lichen to provide balanced nutrition. As reindeer are a herd animal, and even the tamest individual would become worried if separated from the others, we take teams of a minimum of four, and most often six, animals. We know every reindeer in the herd by name and carefully assess their personalities before selecting a team to ensure that bullying by a dominant individual won't take place.

Whilst on tour, the reindeer stay at farm bases overnight, which reduces traveling time. These bases always allow plenty of space to exercise, a comfortable place to sleep and access to grazing. When being transported, we use trucks with specially designed livestock boxes on, with two sections bedded with straw allowing the reindeer space to lie down and turn around. They travel loose and are always happy to load. On most occasions when we check the reindeer mid-trip, they are all lying down and chewing the cud – the ultimate sign of relaxation.

We work very closely with every member of the herd from a young age, meaning they have no fear of humans and are very relaxed even in the presence of crowds. It may seem unlikely that they can adapt so easily from being out in the wilds, dealing with winter blizzards and winds, to pulling a sleigh in a busy town centre, but this is testament to their gentle laid-back natures. Reindeer are experts at conserving energy, as they are designed to survive on minimal food over the harsh winters, so quickly assess whether or not a new situation is a threat and worth wasting energy on. If not, they quickly relax, and by training younger reindeer against older experienced reindeer, they instinctively follow the example of the more mature reindeer.

We also hold a Performing Animals Licence, as required under the Performing Animals Act 1925.

4. Artistic content

Taking the reindeer out on tour greatly increases the number of people who can meet and enjoy them. Many of our parades take place in deprived areas and bring the reindeer to people who would never have the opportunity to travel to the Scottish Highlands to see the herd in their natural habitat. We visit hospitals, old people homes and schools also, places where people really wouldn't have the opportunity to meet a reindeer. When on display, we are on hand at all times to chat to the public and educate them about the species.

9. Using animals in a production

The main call for our reindeer is to take part in Christmas events, usually in towns or cities. Whilst they are by no means essential for a Christmas celebration, the appearance of live reindeer can inspire both children and adults in a way that other attractions don't. As we work with our reindeer year-round, we know their behaviour and individual personalities incredibly well, and can read their mood very accurately. This means that we can take part in parades with virtually no risk to either the public or the animals.

11. Choosing the right animal or trainer

The Cairngorm Reindeer Herd has been running for over sixty years and is the only place in the UK offering the opportunity for reindeer to roam free in their natural habitat. Although reintroduced, reindeer are a native species in Scotland and have an excellent life here, evidenced by their long lifespan and great body condition. When our reindeer go out on tour, it is for a maximum of 2 ½ weeks, before returning to their mountain home. This sets them apart from any other reindeer in the country, who live in permanent captivity. They are truly happy in both their home and work.

All of the reindeer are accompanied on tour by experienced herders who work with the herd all year, not just at Christmas time. We work with the reindeer at every stage of their lives, from birth through when they're first learning to trust humans as calves, to training them to pull the sleigh, taking them on events, feeding them in the depths of winter on the mountains, and caring for them in their retirement. Reindeer aren't just for Christmas. This experience means we know the reindeer inside out, which reassures us that they are comfortable in the situations we put them in.

12. Communication

Many of our events are long-standing ones, where we know exactly what will take place, but every year we review the plans for the set-up area, parade route and display pen to ensure it is suitable and there are no issues which could compromise the welfare of the animals.

13. Production scheduling

We limit the amount of time our reindeer are ever on public display, to ensure they don't become bored and restless. Every event is different, but in general we arrive in plenty of time

to set up and feed the reindeer in a relaxed manner, off public view. We may then take part in a parade before the reindeer spend some time in a display pen. The maximum length of time that the reindeer are on public display is three hours, which we tend to find works very well – they eat their food, lie down and have a sleep, then by the time they are waking up again it is time to leave.

15. Safety meetings

Reindeer do not fall under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, and we don't ever expose them to explosives, fire or hazardous stunts, so special safety meetings aren't required.

16. Emergency plan

As we primarily work out in the open, and not on film sets, there is no requirement for specific emergency plans for escaping fire.

17. Roles and responsibilities

When taking part in events, there are always a minimum of two experienced herders present with the reindeer. This means we are immediately on hand to deal with any problems in the best possible way. We are entirely responsible for the transport, handling and care of the reindeer at every stage. We put the welfare of our animals as top priority and hold the discretion to stop any event we are taking part in at any point, and if necessary take the reindeer away. If a reindeer becomes unwell or appears stressed, we can and will immediately remove them from the situation. Many of our herders hold qualifications in animal care, and all have vast experience working with the herd.

18. Expert advice

Whilst we feel that we are the most experienced people in the country with regards to reindeer welfare, any concerned parties are very welcome to contact the RSPCA, an Independent Animal Welfare Advisor or a vet to obtain a second opinion. We are always very happy to allow full access for professionals to assess the reindeer and our set up.

20. Using a vet

It is not routine for us to have a vet present on events, as there is minimal risk to the health of the reindeer. If there was ever a need for veterinary attention whilst away from home, we would contact a local vet but would also be in telephone contact with our own vet at home, as after sixty years of providing veterinary care for our herd, they are extremely familiar with the reindeer and any ailments, more so than the majority of vets in the country who rarely if ever treat reindeer. Reindeer, in general, are sturdy animals who rarely fall ill, and we are able to quickly pick up on any signs that a reindeer is feeling under the weather. If this is the case, of course they would not attend a public performance.

21. Using an animal behaviour expert

Every species of animal is very different, and exhibits different behaviours. After many years of working closely with the reindeer, we are attuned to their body language and are probably more adept at reading them than most people in the country. Many of these signs are clear to

see and we frequently point them out to onlookers: for example, a reindeer lying down and chewing the cud is relaxed – this is clear as reindeer are a prey animal, and to put themselves into a vulnerable position shows they are not feeling threatened. Some of our reindeer are comfortable enough with the environment on events that they'll go to sleep flat out on their sides, sometimes dreaming and twitching, which is not something that a worried animal would ever dare to do. We are always happy to discuss the reindeer and their behaviour with both the public and professionals.

22. Choosing the right animal

Reindeer were one of the first species to be domesticated and have been used as a beast of burden for thousands of years. Our reindeer have it easy, and only do 2-3 weeks of 'work' a year. The most strenuous thing they are asked to do is pull a sleigh, which is designed especially for them, rolls on wheels, and is mostly pushed by the herder walking at the back. Their training begins at a young age, when we accustom them to humans bringing them food, introduce them to walking on a head-collar, and at an older age gradually train them to wear a harness and pull a sleigh. Whilst living a natural life in the mountains, they are accustomed to tourists visiting them regularly and are keen to mingle and hand feed. They are first exposed to the sights and sounds of a town as calves – once weaned and happy pottering around on a head collar here at home they join a team of older reindeer out on tour. Calves are very impressionable and look to the mature reindeer to find out how to react to new situations. Seeing four older reindeer relaxed, happy and just interested in where the next meal is coming from, even in a town centre surrounded by noise, the calves almost immediately follow their example and settle down.

24. Using domesticated animals

Reindeer were one of the first species to be domesticated, and through thousands of years of living near people have become tame and trusting of humans. Our reindeer are very accustomed to being around people and indeed many will seek out company in a similar way to a cat or dog. Despite this they lead a very natural existence and when not on tour can survive perfectly well on the mountains with no human help. This flexibility is impressive and means that we are able to train them and take them on events with no worries about them being stressed, but also knowing that they have the best possible life for the rest of the year and indeed for their full natural lifespan.

25. Using hand-reared animals

Like all animals, reindeer have the best chance at growing strong and healthy if they are reared by their mother. Our reindeer are excellent mothers and rarely need any help from us in either giving birth or rearing their calf. The new calves are born in May and spend the entire summer roaming free on the mountains with their mothers, before returning of their own accord to lower ground, which is when we start working more closely with them. By the time we train them to walk on a head collar at around six months old, they are not dependent on their mother and are weaned.

26. Animal identification

Every member of our herd is individually identifiable with a numbered ear tag.

27. Minimising disease risks

Our entire herd of reindeer receives routine vaccinations and follows a routine worming programme. We keep individual veterinary records for every reindeer. There is an extremely low risk of reindeer transmitting any zoonotic disease to people. We carry hand sanitiser if any members of the public stroke the animals.

28. Setting up

We factor in a setup time off public view before every event to allow the reindeer to acclimatise to their environment, and more importantly from their point of view, to eat some food. This means that the team of reindeer and the herders are relaxed and prepared before starting the event, and allows the parade route and display pen arrangements to be checked with plenty of time for change if need be.

29. Duration of sessions

We limit the amount of time our reindeer are on public display to ensure they don't become bored and restless. Every event is different, but in general we arrive in plenty of time to set up and feed the reindeer in a relaxed manner, off public view. We may then take part in a parade before the reindeer spend some time in a display pen. The maximum length of time that the reindeer are on public display is three hours, which we tend to find works very well – they eat their food, lie down and have a sleep, then by the time they are waking up again it is time to leave.

31. Provisions for animals

We provide fresh water and bring our own specially mixed feed for the reindeer, which is available at all times during setup and whilst in the display pen. Straw is put down for the reindeer to lie on.

32. Problems during production

During the event, there are always a minimum of two herders available, one of which will have direct view of the reindeer at all times. This means we are immediately on hand to deal with any problems in the best possible way. We are entirely responsible for the transport, handling and care of the reindeer at every stage. We put the welfare of our animals as top priority and hold the discretion to stop any event we are taking part in at any point, and if necessary take the reindeer away. If a reindeer becomes unwell or appears stressed, we can and will immediately remove them from the situation. Many of our herders hold qualifications in animal care, and all have vast experience working with the herd.

33. Health and safety for animals

We assess the sites for setup, parade route and display pen before the reindeer are unloaded to check for any hazards. An experienced herder is with the reindeer at all times, and we are responsible for all handling of the animals. This minimises any risk to the reindeer.

34. Levels of noise

Christmas events can be noisy, but the reindeer are acclimatised gradually to traffic, etc from a young age and show no signs of being fearful of loud noises as long as they can see where it is coming from. We constantly monitor their behaviour to ensure they are relaxed, and prevent loud noises (ie bands) or traffic from approaching too closely.

35. Methods to create specific behaviours

We train our castrated male reindeer to pull the sleigh for parades at three years old, but this is the culmination of a long slow training process. As calves they are trained to walk on a head-collar, in a similar way that a puppy learns to walk on a lead, and they fast become tame and greedy. As yearlings and two-year-olds they learn to wear a simple harness, so at age three sleigh training is a simple process of standing them next to an experienced reindeer, harnessing and putting them into trace and they simply follow the example of the older reindeer. It rarely takes more than two or three half-hour sessions before they are striding confidently along pulling the sleigh whilst chewing the cud. All of our training is done with positive reinforcement – anything new (the head collar, the harness, etc) is accompanied with a bucket of lichen (their favourite food), a reassuring word, and a steady reindeer beside them to set an example.

36. Equipment

Our harnesses and sleighs are designed to our own specifications and are a result of years of fine-tweaking to perfect the design. The harness fits comfortably and puts no pressure on the reindeer. The sleigh itself runs on wheels, and most of the weight is pushed by the herder walking behind the sleigh. The reindeer do very little physical work at all aside from walking along.

37. Weather conditions

Reindeer are designed to cope with arctic conditions and as so feel no negative effect from wind, rain, snow and cold – at home on the mountains they don't even seek shelter, instead relying on their thick coats. Heat is the bigger problem for reindeer, which is why we only journey south in the months of November and December, when the temperatures nationwide are cooler and acceptable for the reindeer.

39. Using animals together

Our reindeer live together as a herd at home, as they are comfortable in a group, and this is how we take them out on tour too, with a minimum of four animals on any team.

47. Dealing with animals after a production

Every reindeer that is born in our herd will live its entire natural life out here on the mountains. We don't sell any of our reindeer as we believe the best life for them is here in the Cairngorms – the only place in the UK where they can roam free in their natural habitat. After doing their two week stint away on tour, delighting the public across the country, every reindeer returns home to the mountains where they belong, to have a well-earned rest. Once they reach their old age, they retire from public appearances and remain part of the herd until they pass away from natural causes. Reindeer are for life, not just for Christmas.

48. Housing

Whilst on tour, the reindeer stay at farm bases overnight, which reduces traveling time. These bases always allow plenty of space to exercise, a comfortable place to sleep and access to grazing. When being transported, we use trucks with specially designed livestock boxes on, with two sections bedded with straw allowing the reindeer space to lie down and turn around. They travel loose and are always happy to load. On most occasions when we check the reindeer mid-trip, they are all lying down and chewing the cud – the ultimate sign of relaxation. At events there is always ample space to walk around and lie down comfortably on a bed of straw. Many of our reindeer choose to walk to the edge of the pen to interact with the public, but this is always on their terms and the pen is large enough to allow them to stay out of arm's reach. We don't encourage reindeer to come to the side to be petted, as on the whole they are not a tactile species.

49. Tethering

Whilst we rarely tether the reindeer, preferring to have them loose in a pen, if it is necessary to tie them then they are monitored at all times, and have food and water within reach, with a long enough rope that they can lie down or stand as they wish.

51. Diet

When on tour we take all of our own feed – the same mix which we use to supplement the natural browse of the reindeer when at home. This is a specially blended dry mix, supplemented by ample lichen, a favoured natural food source for reindeer. Experienced herders can monitor their feeding, defecating and urinating to ensure they are in full health.

52. Access to water

The reindeer have constant access to fresh water.

53. Exercise

The reindeer have opportunity to run and exercise every day whilst away on tour, in a field at one of our farm bases.

54. Condition checks

The reindeer are monitored at all times by experienced herders who are well accustomed to their behaviour and can quickly spot any variation in behaviour.

55. Fitness to work

We put the welfare of our animals as top priority and hold the discretion to stop any event we are taking part in at any point, and if necessary take the reindeer away. If a reindeer becomes unwell or appears stressed, we can and will immediately remove them from the situation.

56. Rest areas

Our set up area is off public view and provides a chance for the animals to relax after traveling, eat and become accustomed to their surroundings.

58. Condition checks

Our harness is made of a soft leather and never causes any problems with rubbing or sores.

60. Transport

Whilst on tour, the reindeer stay at farm bases overnight, which reduces traveling time. These bases always allow plenty of space to exercise, a comfortable place to sleep and access to grazing. When being transported, we use trucks with specially designed livestock boxes on, with two sections bedded with straw allowing the reindeer space to lie down and turn around. They travel loose and are always happy to load. On most occasions when we check the reindeer mid-trip, they are all lying down and chewing the cud – the ultimate sign of relaxation. The reindeer rarely travel for longer than three hours at a time, and are always accompanied by experienced herders.

62. Paperwork

We fill in and file relevant Animal Transport Certificates detailing every journey the reindeer make.

63. Transport vehicles

When being transported, we use trucks with specially designed livestock boxes on, with two sections bedded with straw allowing the reindeer space to lie down and turn around. Trucks are mucked out after every journey to keep them clean and pleasant for the reindeer to travel in.

64. Transporting in groups

Each section of the truck holds three reindeer, which means they have companions to keep them company but enough space to lie down comfortably.

67. Methods of training animals

We train our castrated male reindeer to pull the sleigh for parades at three years old, but this is the culmination of a long slow training process. As calves they are trained to walk on a head-collar, in a similar way that a puppy learns to walk on a lead, and they fast become tame and greedy. As yearlings and two-year-olds they learn to wear a simple harness, so at age three sleigh training is a simple process of standing them next to an experienced reindeer, harnessing and putting them into trace and they simply follow the example of the older reindeer. It rarely takes more than two or three half-hour sessions before they are striding confidently along pulling the sleigh whilst chewing the cud. All of our training is done with positive reinforcement – anything new (the head collar, the harness, etc) is accompanied with a bucket of lichen (their favourite food), a reassuring word, and a steady reindeer beside them to set an example.

68. Using food and water for training

Water and the daily food ration is never withheld when training. We use additional lichen when training as a reward, which is a healthy treat and doesn't need to be restricted.

72. Length of time to train properly

All of our reindeer are trained at home before ever joining a Christmas team, meaning they are comfortable with what they are expected to do before ever arriving at an event.

Conclusion

We are confident that our reindeer are happy and comfortable in the work which they are asked to do, and hope that by addressing the points in these guidelines that we have allayed any concerns that the public may have. We are always happy to discuss our methods and procedures and answer questions, so if there are any points which readers feel have not been answered, please don't hesitate to get in touch or visit us at home or at an event. In the end, nothing speaks louder than the condition and behaviour of our reindeer, which we're very proud of, and we feel that this proves that they are content and lead full and happy lives.