

# Smart Stuff

with Twig Walkingstick



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION  
OHIO AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH  
AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

For the week of  
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## Q. Dear Twig: Do reindeer really play games?

A. Reindeer play but not real games. They start when they're young. They chase each other. They jump up and down. They do things called **mutual threat displays**. That means they scowl and shake fists at each other. Except they don't have fists.

No, they don't play games with scores or uniforms or Yukon Cornelius driving them to practice in a minivan. He drives a dog sled anyway.

But reindeer play has a serious purpose. It lets them practice things they'll need to know how to do when they're grown-ups. Like warning the herd of danger. Getting away from danger (such as a wolf). And fighting to not get eaten or win a mate.

How, in fact, does a reindeer warn of danger? It jumps in the air — what scientists call an **excitation leap** — and then runs away. All of the other reindeer see the leap, see the running, and take off running, too. Provided they learned the drill as calves.

Know what that reindeer, the eagle-eyed spotter of danger, does first of all before leaping? A book called *Mammalian Social Learning* tells us. It "looks directly at the source of disturbance and spreads its hind legs, usually also urinating."

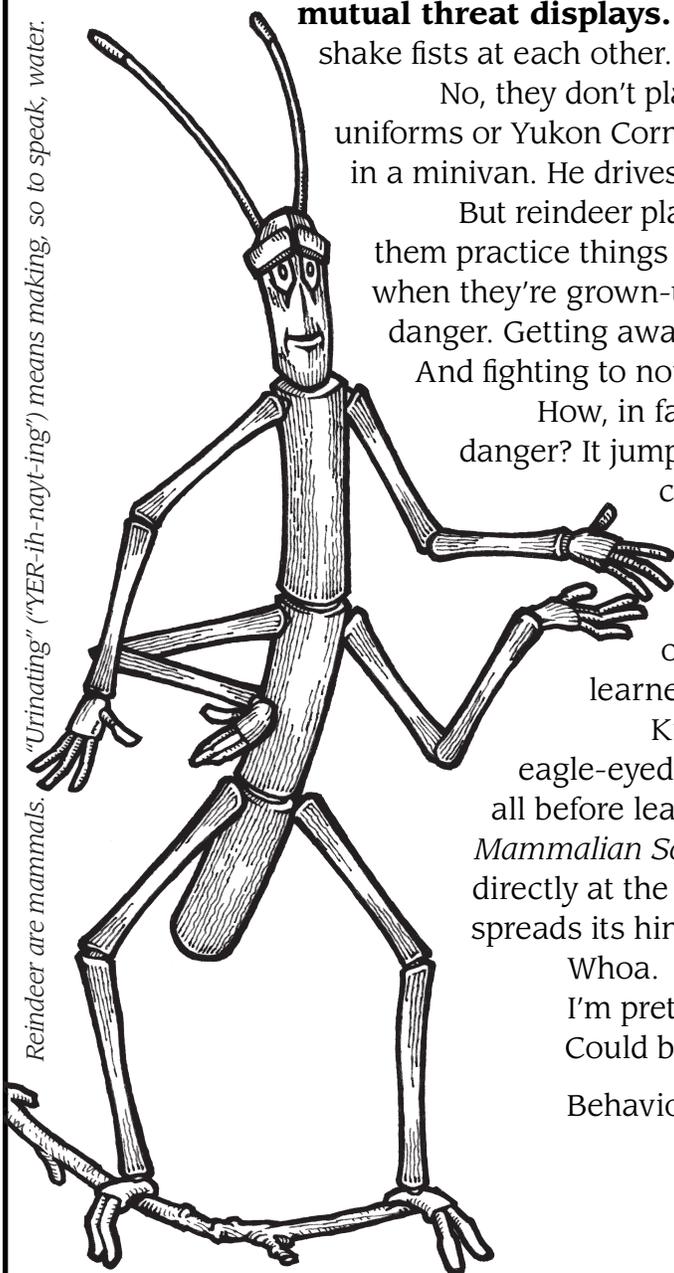
Whoa.

I'm pretty sure Rudolph didn't do that. Could be why the Bumble caught him.

Behaviorally,

Twig

Reindeer are mammals. "Urinating" ("YER-ih-nayt-ing") means making, so to speak, water.



From your scientific friends at The Ohio State University — specifically, the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center ([www.oardc.ohio-state.edu](http://www.oardc.ohio-state.edu)) and OSU Extension ([extension.osu.edu](http://extension.osu.edu)).

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**Notes:** The part from *Mammalian Social Learning* comes from the chapter titled "Comparative Social Learning Among Arctic Herbivores: The Caribou, Muskox and Arctic Hare," written by David R. Klein. Caribou and reindeer belong to the same species, *Rangifer tarandus*. Sometimes "reindeer" refers to the domestic version and "caribou" to the kind in the wild. But mostly it depends on where the animals live — Alaska or Scandinavia, etc. — as to what people call them. For our purposes here, "reindeer" equals "caribou," and vice versa. The Bumble? It's made up. Fictional. Unknown to science. But at least one observer has reported it bouncing. OK, that's made up, too.

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