



Stuart McMillen presents

February 2011

ST MATTHEW ISLAND



St Matthew Island. A remote outcrop in the Bering Sea
300km from mainland Alaska.

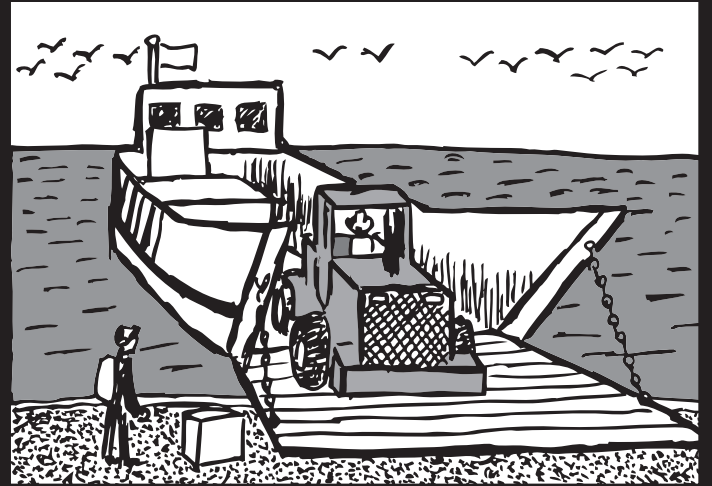
1944: The U.S. Coast Guard establishes a LORAN (long-range radio navigation system) on St Matthew Island, staffed by a crew of 19 men.



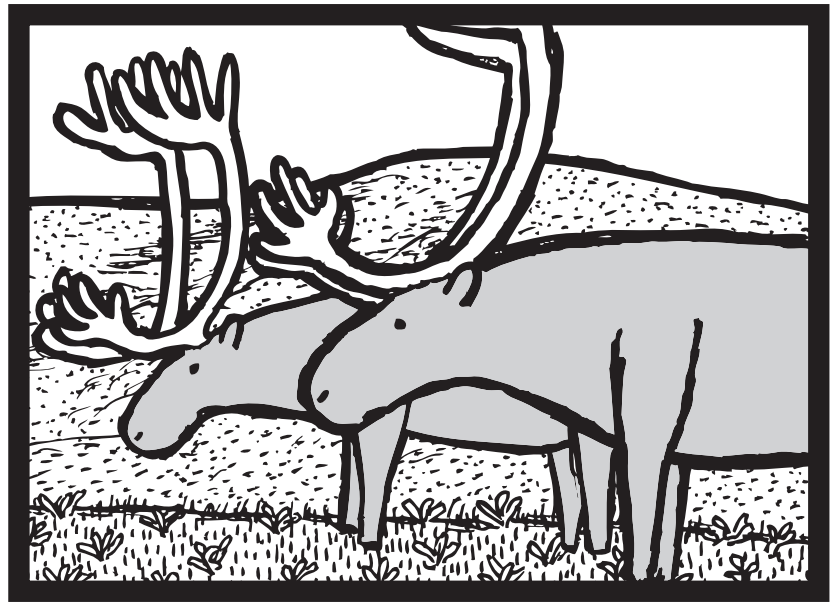
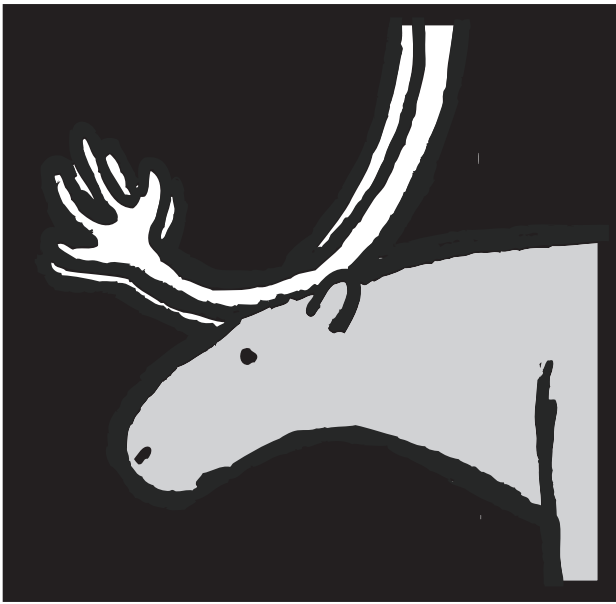
29 reindeer are released onto the island as a backup food source.



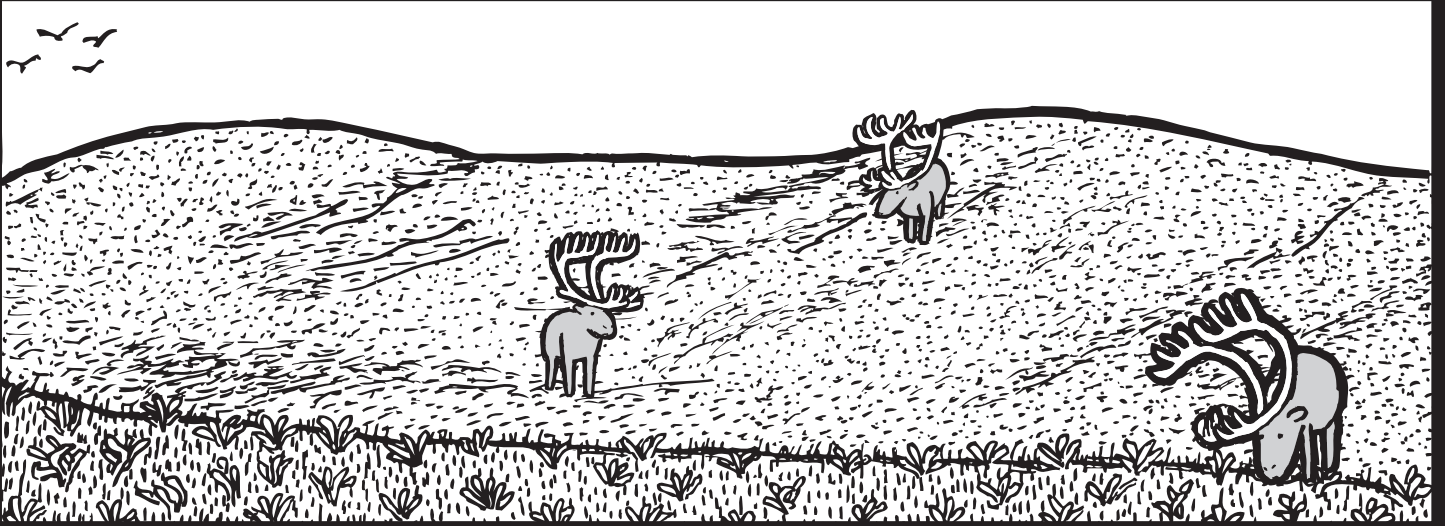
Within months the station is decommissioned and the men leave the island.



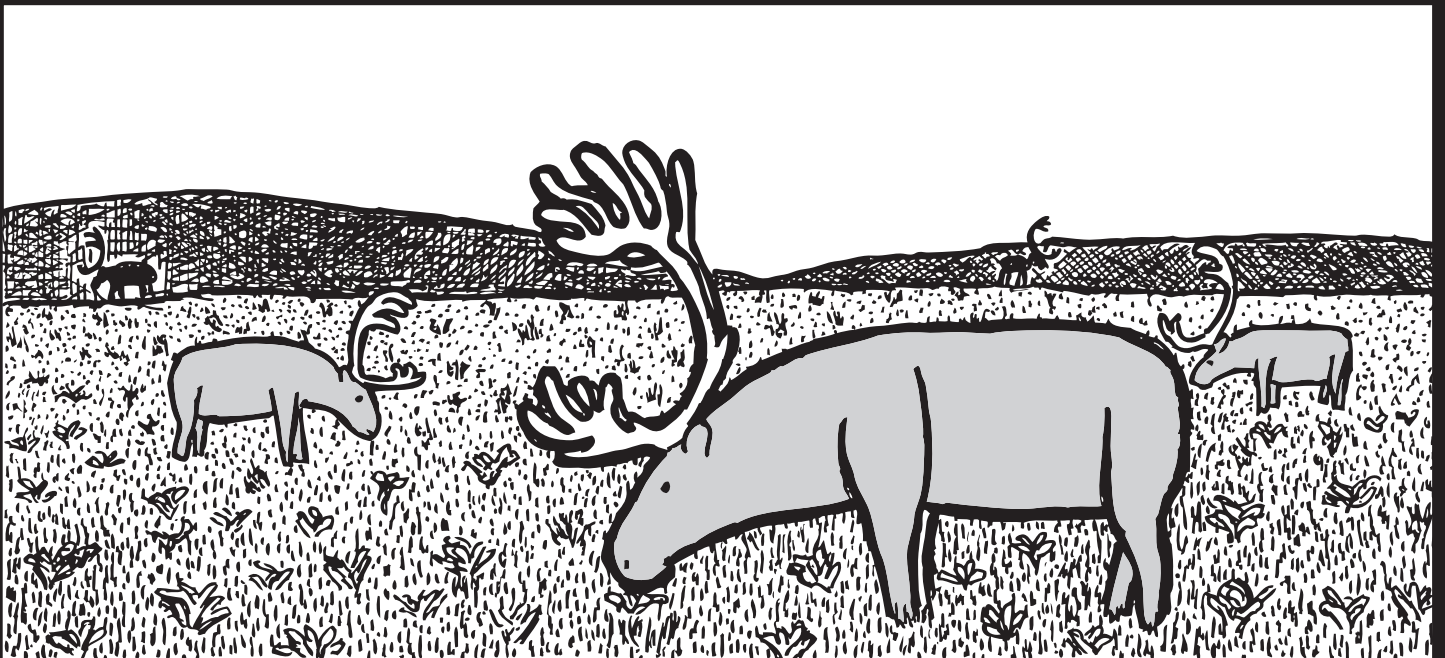
The reindeer are left behind.



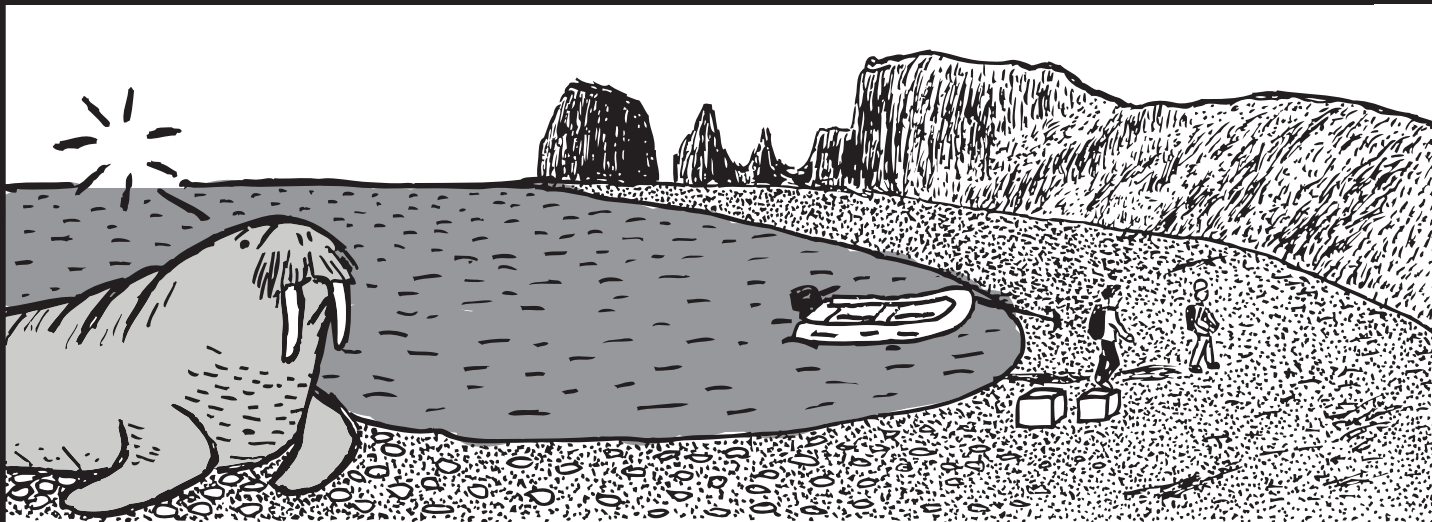
The reindeer find themselves on an island rich in their favourite food, lichen.



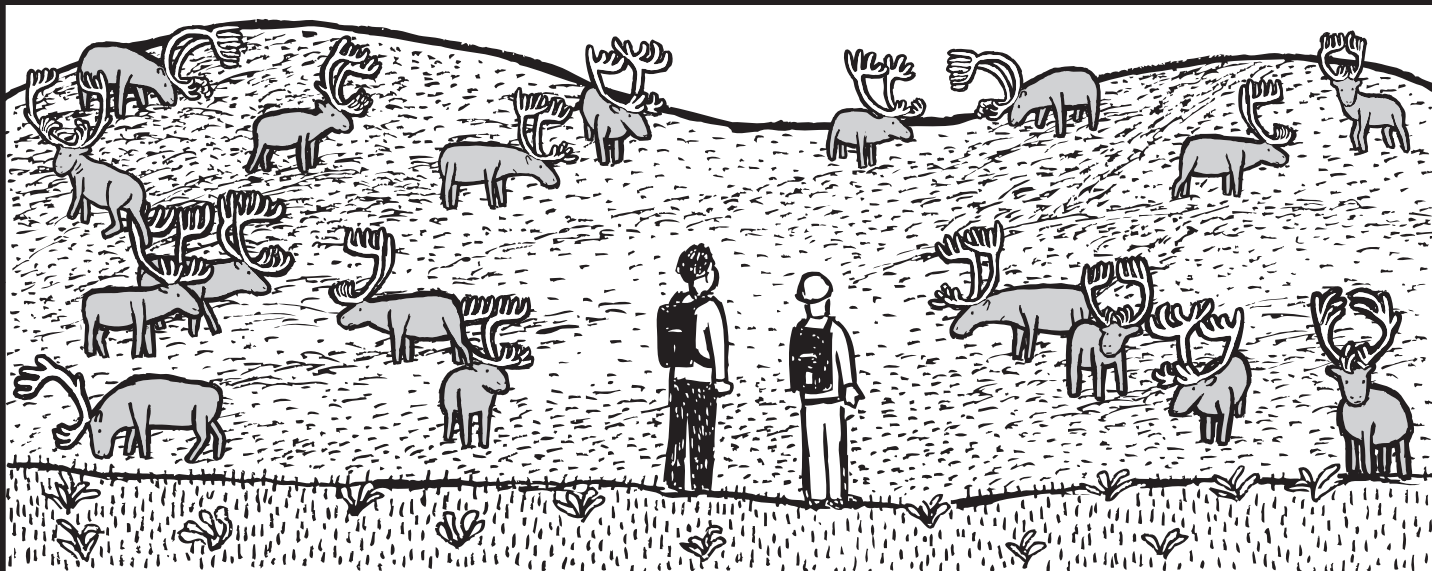
With abundant resources and no natural predators, the reindeer breed prolifically.



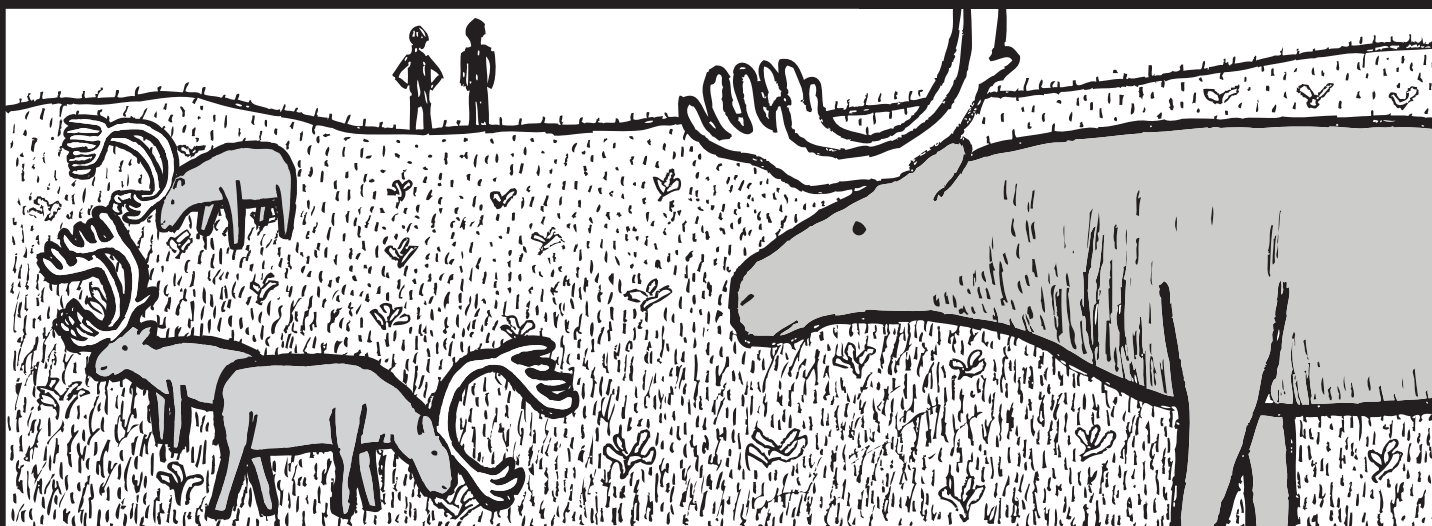
Summer 1957: Humans visit St Matthew Island on a research trip.



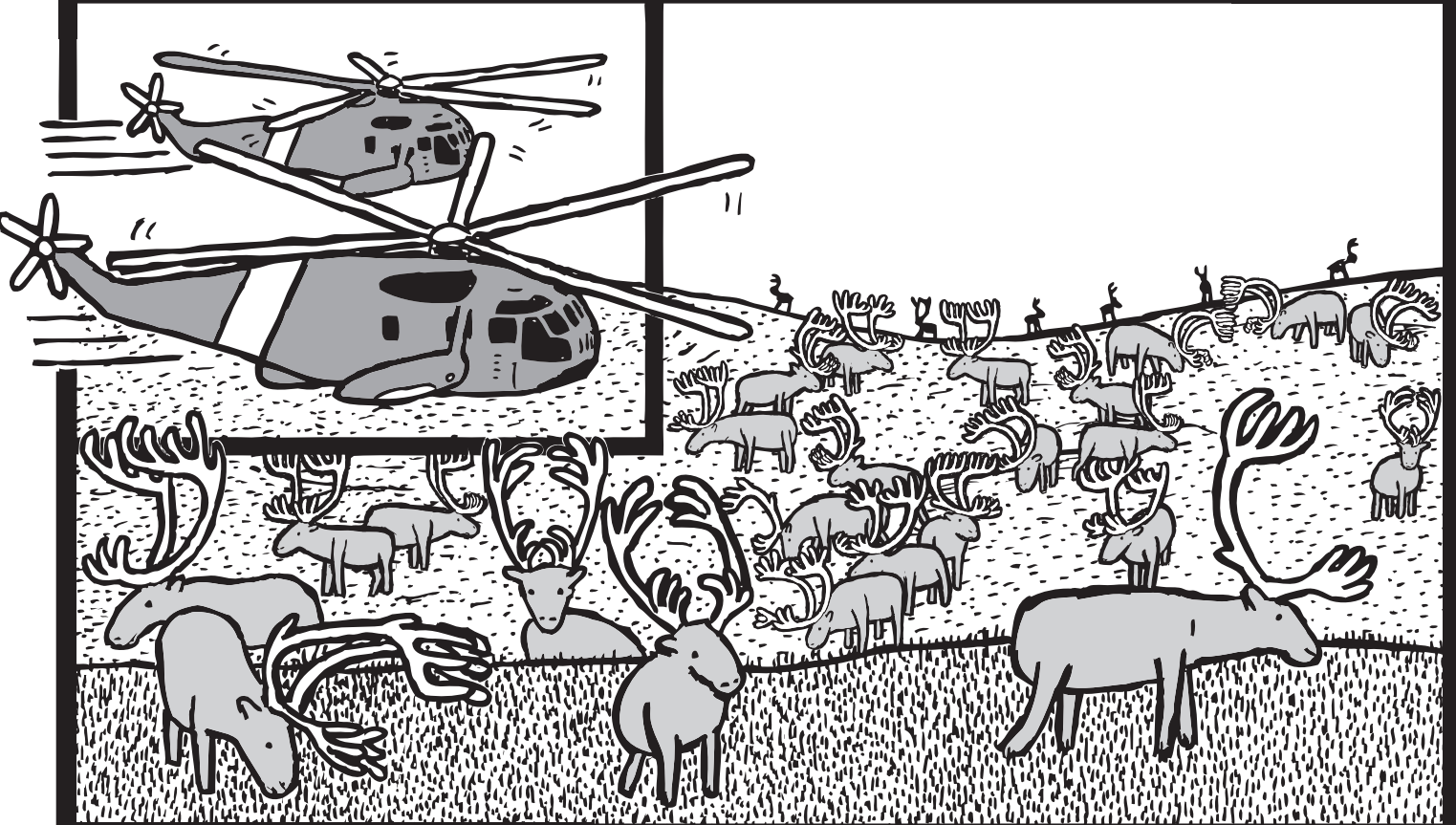
In just 13 years the reindeer herd has ballooned from 29 to 1,350 individuals.



The reindeer are in excellent health, fat from their nutritious diet of lichen.

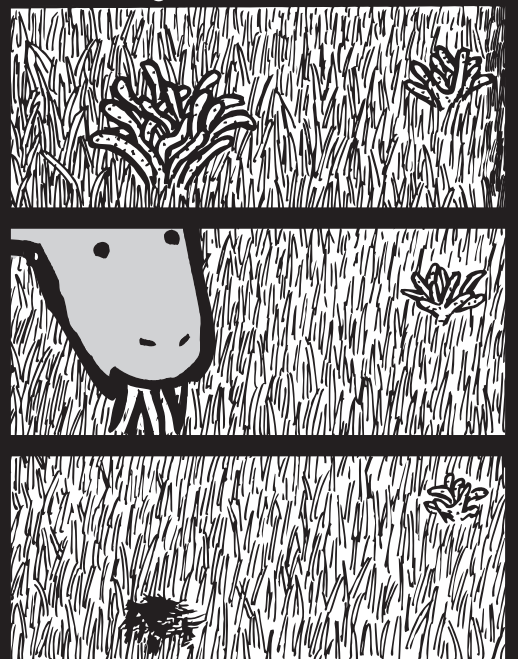
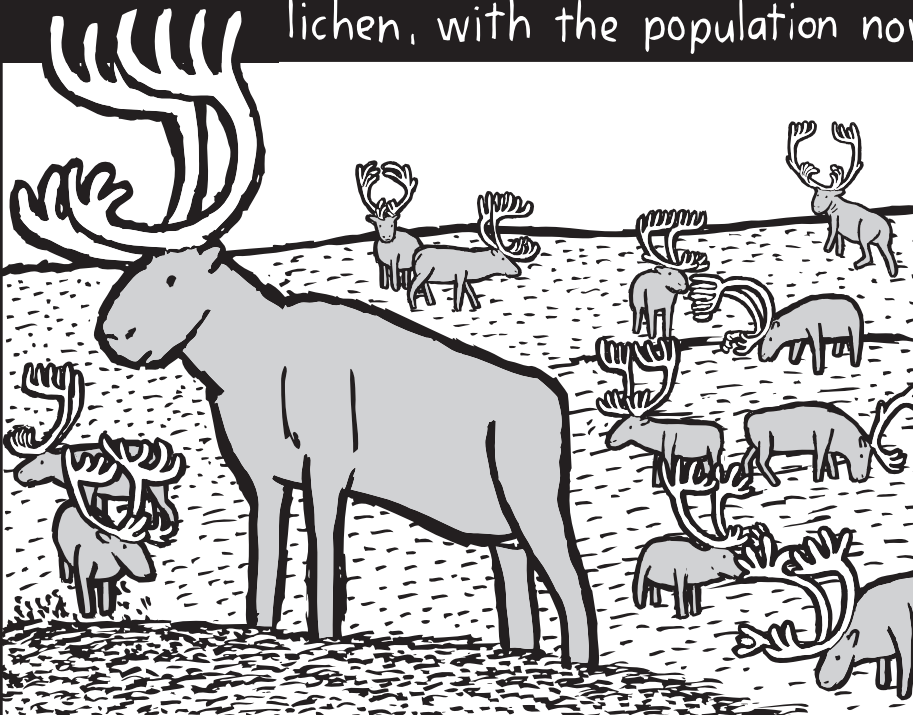


Summer 1963: The researchers revisit St Matthew Island.



In six years the reindeer population has soared from 1,350 individuals to 6,000.

The dense herd's huge appetite has eliminated the island's lichen, with the population now grazing on sedge grass.



With increased competition for food, the animals' body weight has dropped since the last visit.

Summer 1966: The researchers return to St Matthew Island.



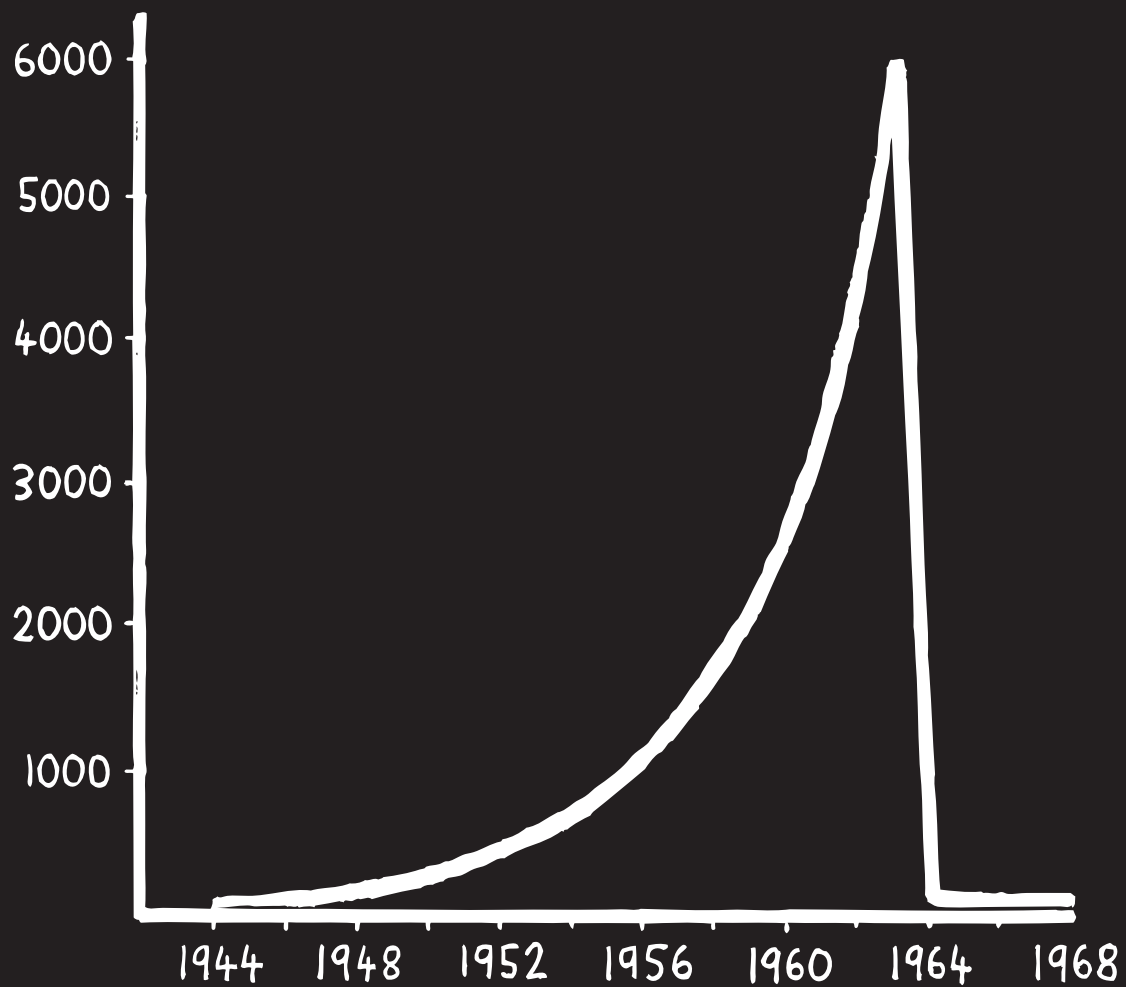
They find the island littered with reindeer skeletons.



From a population peak of 6,000, only 42 reindeer remain: 41 females and one infertile male. There are no calves.

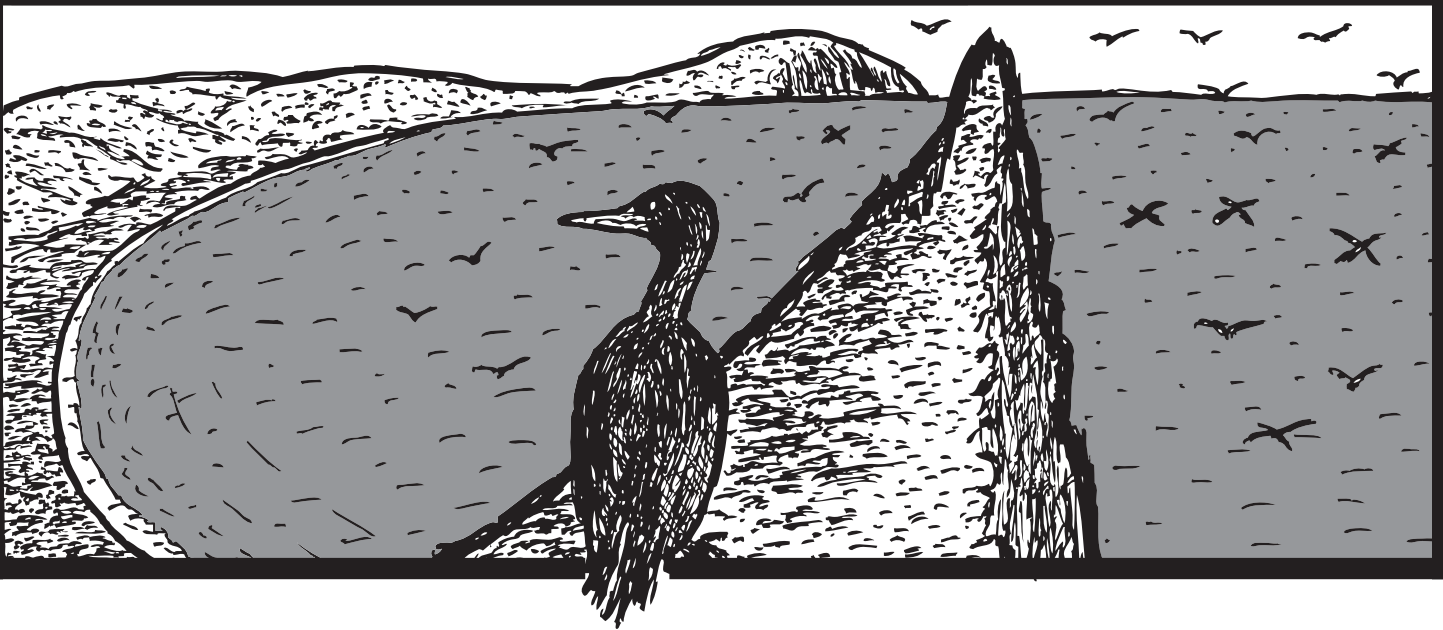


With their habitat's resources stretched, the population had been unable to survive the extremes of winter.

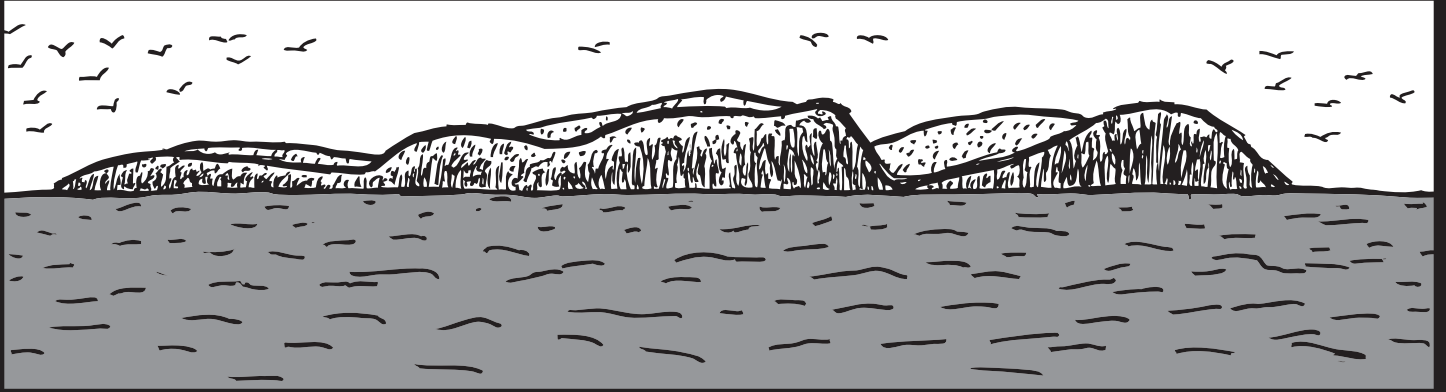


In a matter of months, the population crashed by more than 99%.

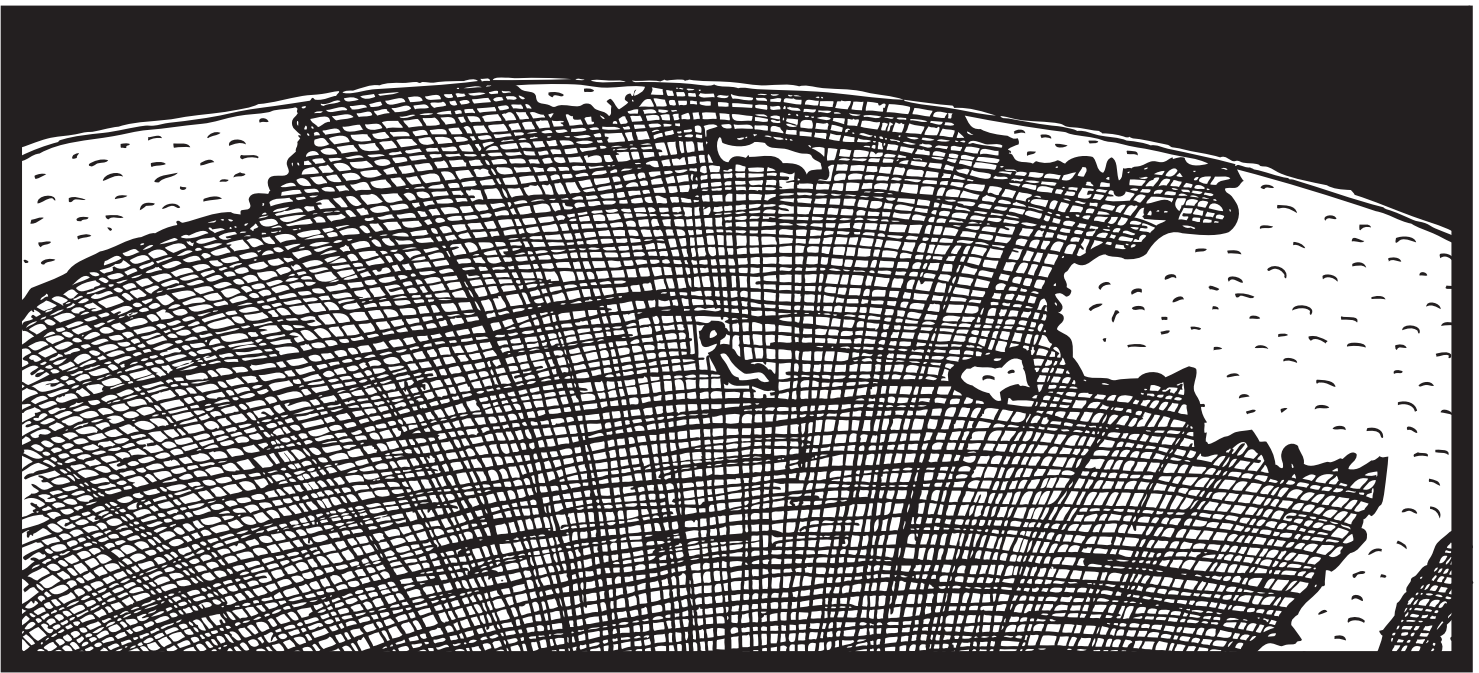
Without a way to reproduce, the reindeer population died off completely by the 1980s.



The island's untapped natural resources became the reindeer's source of prosperity, and also the seeds of their demise.



The island was only so big, its resources only so many.



How big is our island?

