

# PACK FRAME

## Pronghorn

By Fred W. Williams • BGC Associate



After years of using a 4x4 to cover ground while hunting pronghorn on the sage prairies, it was a real paradigm shift to think about hunting pronghorn on foot in the mountains. I have never given a second thought about walking miles from a trailhead to hunt deer and elk, but a “pack frame” hunt for pronghorn was certainly a different approach. I had to try something different in order to improve my odds for drawing a Wyoming pronghorn tag in a prime area. I had been unsuccessful in drawing the tag I wanted for nearly a decade.

After studying the drawing statistics, I recognized that I had a 100% chance of drawing a tag for an area in which I had hunted elk, moose, and mule deer. I also realized that over the years I had consistently seen pronghorn in the area. Private ranches surround this area and the pronghorn tend to concentrate on the hay meadows. It is also common to see the pronghorn travelling back and forth between the largely private meadows onto the public ground and into the broken sagebrush areas between the timbered ridges. I have even occasionally spotted the odd pronghorn in timber and in the willows down in the drainages. The trick was physically getting to the pronghorn.

The 100% drawing odds are substantially a result of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department’s identification of the area as one of the “hunt areas with difficult public access.” Until this year I always interpreted “difficult public access” as “difficult to get permission to hunt” private property. My interpretation was only partially correct. It can certainly be difficult to get permission to hunt on any of the private properties. But “difficult public access” for this area also meant that you could only access the public land by foot, and “access” is measured in miles.

Difficult physical access or not, I was determined to hunt pronghorn and was willing to give a new area a try. I even rationalized that pronghorn really deserve more respect as a big game animal. I asked myself why shouldn’t I be willing to work just as hard for a

mature pronghorn buck as I would for any other big game animal? That’s fair chase!

July 2000 arrived before I knew it and my pronghorn tag arrived in the mailbox. It was time to plan my hunt. I picked a date of October 1st, which was two weeks after the opener. By then most hunters in “my” area would have filled their tags and moved on to deer and elk hunting. I would have the pronghorn hunting to myself. I didn’t really have a feel for either the quantity or the quality of the bucks that I was going to see. I didn’t want to simply fill my tag. Therefore, the plan was to take both my rifle, a Remington 700 chambered for 7mm Remington Mag., and my handgun, a Remington XP100 chambered for .308.

I planned to take my time to scope out the resident prong-

horn by committing to more and more difficult hikes as each day of the hunt passed. Initially, I hoped to carry my pack frame and my rifle and if “Mr. Boone and Crockett” offered the opportunity, I would take him. Otherwise, I would pass on all bucks until I had a good idea of the quantity and the quality of the horns for the area. If the bucks were generally average or small and there were lots of opportunities for a close stalk, I could switch over to the handgun and go after a mature buck at close range.

On September 30th, I flew west. The frequent flyer miles blessed me with a free ticket and a tour of many of America’s finest airports between Indianapolis and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. A straight line may be the shortest distance between two points, but it isn’t necessarily the cheapest route. In any case, I got there and amazingly my luggage arrived at the same time.

My dad met me at the airport. As a resident of Wyoming, he draws a pronghorn tag virtually every year for the same prime area where I have not successfully drawn a tag for nearly a decade. To say that I envy him would be an understatement. Thankfully, my dad is still able to handle some moderately difficult hunts. He would join me for this hunt. But I couldn’t convince him to pack out my pronghorn for me if I was fortunate enough to get one.

My arrival at the Jackson airport was early enough to scope out some of the pronghorn in “my” area from the road on the way to my folk’s home. There were some good ones! But they looked pretty smug, fat, happy, and almost tame standing out in the private hay meadows. They knew they were untouchable! We used the balance of that day for a trip to the shooting range to verify the zero on both my rifle and handgun, plus a few more practice rounds. I was determined to be ready to start hunting after a good dinner and a good night’s sleep.

One thing that I absolutely love about pronghorn hunting is that you can successfully hunt

them any time of the day. No getting up before dawn! You can sleep in and have that second cup of coffee! I especially appreciated this after not fully recovering from all the travel the previous day. Sticking to the plan, this first day of hunting was intended to be physically our easiest. Short walks from the truck, glassing the ridges, and checking out all the smug bucks on private property from a distance was in order. On October 1st, I was greeted by a gorgeous Wyoming morning. Not five minutes into the hunt, I found myself glassing a good buck tending a herd of does on a butte above the ranches. He was definitely a shooter (14” plus and good mass), but not a first morning buck. Especially not five minutes into the hunt. I think Dad and I saw about 100 pronghorn before the day was over. A lot of small bucks and most of them on private property. The next day would be more physically demanding.

The second day of my hunt was also a gorgeous sunny day. Since it was easy, Dad and I checked on the good buck we spotted the previous day on the butte. He was still there and he was still good. I passed on him again. The master plan was to hike into a large basin on public ground behind an elk winter feed station and above a large ranch with vast hay fields full of pronghorn. The easiest access to the basin was to cross the hay meadows. But we had to get permission to cross the private property.

We caught up to the ranch manager just as he and several other cowboys were completing a cattle drive. Although we knew him as a personal friend, we were unable to get permission to cross the ranch. I had to give the manager credit. He wanted to give us permission, but he couldn’t justify bending the rules of the ranch even for friends. We had to gain “difficult public access” the hard way. Boot leather!

After a mile-and-a-half and a lot of climbing over the ridges and through the pick-up sticks in the black timber, we were finally able to glass the remote basin dur-

ing the last few hours of daylight. Pronghorn were sprinkled all over the basin and the surrounding ridges. We saw singles, small groups, and groups with as many as 10 to 15 animals. We also realized that we were beginning to witness the tail end of the rut. The big herd bucks were starting to isolate themselves and the smaller bucks were moving in to tend the does. It was fun to sit on the edge of the basin and watch the small

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bucks try to herd the does and fend off other small bucks.

We spotted one good buck bedded at the edge of the black timber at the crest of a main ridge across the basin. It would have been an easy stalk to come up on him downwind and through the timber. I passed on him, however, along with several other opportunities that afternoon. Dad and I hadn’t seen any other pronghorn hunters for two days and guessed that I could come back and chase these pronghorn again if the good weather held out.

October 3rd brought yet another crisp Wyoming morning with cloudless, azure skies. A great day to hunt pronghorn. While drinking our second cup of coffee, Dad and I discussed the remaining two areas we wanted to investi-

**The author with the pronghorn boned, caped, and ready for the four mile walk back to the truck.**

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**The author with his pronghorn on the edge of the willows as the sun is setting. Note the timbered butte in the background -- this isn't typical pronghorn country!**



gate. Both areas held pronghorn and both involved a great deal of steep walking to access. The first area was a large butte that is landlocked by private land. Because the public access points weren't well defined, we decided to attempt to either get permission to cross a bordering ranch or get a better definition of the public access points from the ranch manager. But again we were politely denied permission to cross the ranch. The manager also confirmed what we already suspected: the property borders were too ill-defined and narrow to risk accessing the butte without trespassing.

Dad and I fell back on "Plan B." The last area we wanted to investigate was a huge basin several miles long with high ridges and multiple drainages bordered by private ranches. We both knew the basin well because of our previous experience hunting deer and elk in the area for many years. We also knew that we had a long and steep walk to access the basin. It was almost lunchtime when we started our climb. So we decided to load the pack frame with our lunches and climb to the spot overlooking the head of the basin. Not knowing what we might encounter, I carried my rifle. Most of the afternoon was spent walking the basin and the surrounding ridges without seeing even one pronghorn.

By late afternoon, Dad decided he was going to take a nap while I climbed one last high butte in order to scope the balance of the basin on the opposite side. After a lot of huffing and puffing, I reached the crest of the butte and set up the spotting scope just below the top so that I wouldn't be skylined. I had scoped the entire basin without seeing a pronghorn and was just about ready to leave when I decided to take one last look down into the willows in the main drainage. I couldn't believe my eyes. I had spotted a group of pronghorn in the willows about one-and-a-half miles away. Apparently they had moved into the willows to get a drink. I found the herd buck and even at that distance I could tell that he had exceptional cutters. He de-

served a closer look! He would be a "keeper" if he had good height and curl.

It was getting pretty late in the afternoon when I caught up with Dad. We decided that we didn't have enough daylight remaining to spend a lot of time studying the buck from a distance and then stalk within rifle range. Our strategy was to bet on the odds that it was a good buck and make the stalk. I would judge the buck through the cross hairs. The stalk was on! The challenge was the vast strip of willows between us and the pronghorn. Dad and I put a plan together, in which I would leave him at a patch of aspen where he could watch the pronghorn and my progress from a distance. Then I would stalk the buck and make the final judgment on my own.

I left Dad and entered the willows. I guess the next series of events provided endless entertainment for my dad (of which I will never hear the end). I got turned around in the willows and couldn't have found that pronghorn if my life depended on it. The willows were taller than my head and I couldn't see any landmarks to get oriented. My dad could see the pronghorn and then a blaze orange hat appearing periodically as I passed back and forth trying to find them. I can't say how close I got to those pronghorn without seeing them. (My dad's story is that I passed within yards!) Let's just say that it was too darn close! The only thing that prevented me from blowing the stalk was the wind was in my favor and the pronghorn were used to range cattle making noise in the willows.

Finally, out of frustration, I went back to my dad's vantage point to get a better reference. After getting reoriented, we both went on the stalk. This time we walked right up to the pronghorn. Then the problem was that we were too close and couldn't shoot. The buck and several does were only about 25 yards from us on the edge of the willows. I couldn't move forward without being seen and I couldn't shoot because the willows were over my head and obstructing my view of the buck.

Periodically, I could see the buck's horns. He was definitely a "keeper" even if we were four miles from the truck! The buck had the best mass and the biggest cutters that I had ever seen and his horn length was at least 14 inches, possibly 15. Now my challenge was to figure out how to get a shot. I wished that I had the handgun. Dad and I strategized that maybe I could move forward until either I got the shot or the pronghorn spooked. Because of the light hunting pressure, we figured that if the pronghorn spooked, they might only run a short distance and stop momentarily to look back out of curiosity.

I had just started moving forward when I saw a doe craning her neck and looking right at me. All I could do was sit on my knees, remain motionless, and wait. I couldn't believe what happened next. Out of curiosity or thirst, the pronghorn started coming into the willows. I was too far from my dad to talk to him, so all I could do was wave my hand at my side and motion to watch forward. Things got pretty exciting when the lead doe

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walked within 15 feet of my dad and the buck passed me at 20 feet without offering a shot.

Then the pronghorn smelled, heard, or saw us. The entire herd busted out of the willows! It was a great moment of chaos that offered me an opportunity. With all the commotion of hooves and breaking willow branches, I ran forward with the herd. I cleared the willows with my rifle in position just as the pronghorn pulled the classic: they stopped to look back. The biggest pronghorn buck of my hunting experience offered a broadside shot at 35 yards. It wasn't a challenging shot, but it was the most exciting pronghorn stalk that I have ever had. At 75+ points he won't make the "book" but he was a fine trophy that will provide memories

for a lifetime, and stories for Dad.

Daylight was fading fast as we snapped pictures and admired the buck and the surrounding mountains in the Wyoming sunset. It was dark by the time we started to walk the four miles back to the truck. It was too late to cape and bone the pronghorn. We figured that the field dressed animal would cool down fast as the temperatures dropped into the 20s that night. The next day would be another beautiful day that we would dedicate to walking back to pack out the pronghorn. In the end we had a fabulous hunt that can't be called anything else but "fair chase" because of an incredible stalk and 16 miles of walking to harvest a beautiful animal. ▲▲▲