

The Self-Guided Hunter...

PRONGHORN HUNTING

MAKE IT AN ENJOYABLE AND SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE

Ninth in a series...

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Back in the early 1960s my Dad, an avid Kansas bird hunter, was stuck with a son who was desperate to hunt "big game." Kansas' first modern deer season was yet to be held, so traveling out of state was his only option for scratching my itch. Dad enlisted the aid of his old friend Jack Pohl, owner of the Bishop gunstock company in Warsaw, Missouri. Jack had already brought us down the centerfire rifle road, not only spending time in range sessions and hunting woodchucks, but teaching us handloading as well. He figured a pronghorn hunt in Wyoming would be just the thing

to get a new hunter started right.

Even then the permits were by drawing, so at Jack's recommendation we applied for licenses in the country south of Gillette . . . and we drew. Dad sort of understood that his buddy, Jack, knew some ranchers in the area, so we didn't do any further planning or preparation. Just a few days before the hunt Jack Pohl stepped off his horse and into a hole, badly breaking his right ankle. In his place, his son, Henry (Bishop's is gone, but Henry Pohl is still in the gunstock business with his Great American Gunstock company), came along to help us out.

Except that Henry didn't know the area and didn't know

any ranchers. We pitched up in Gillette a couple of days ahead of the season and went to the Chamber of Commerce. No, they didn't know any ranchers who would welcome hunters. But they drew us a map and gave us good advice: "Get a tank of gas, some sandwiches and coffee, and start driving. Stop at every ranch you come to, and you'll probably find something." So we did.

Even 35 years ago there were a couple of signs that read, "Hunters not welcome, don't ask." And there was one rancher who would be glad to let us hunt . . . for \$500, a lot of money back then. But we kept going, and near what is now Wright, Wyoming we knocked on the door of Lester Wright. He looked at Dad and his red-headed son, and reckoned that if we'd come back about dawn he could help us "find that kid an antelope." He did. We were pretty green at this game, and we did a lot of missing. But early in the afternoon I took a very nice buck right in the middle of what is now the town of Wright.

THE UNGUIDED OPTION


I am sure that all hunters hold a special fondness for the hunt that got them started. For most this is deer—whitetail for easterners, mule deer for westerners. For me it is pronghorn antelope. I love the clear air and open vistas of their high plains, and I thoroughly enjoy stalking this sharp-eyed speed demon. In the years that followed Dad and I made a few more trips to Wright, Wyoming. Later we hunted around Lusk, and in 1978, after I got off active duty with the Marines, we hunted on Wright's place one more time.

But that was hardly the

...of all the western game species, the pronghorn is the animal that offers the best opportunity for the unconnected, unguided, do-it-yourself non-resident to enjoy a high-quality, successful hunting experience. My Dad and I with a couple of near-identical Montana bucks. These bucks are about 12 inches-and in

some areas and some years this is about as big as they get.



A photograph of a pronghorn antelope standing on a grassy hillside. The antelope is facing left, with its head turned slightly towards the camera. It has a brown and white coat and small, dark horns. The background consists of rolling hills and mountains under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

Antilocapra americana is as
democratic as he is fun to hunt.
Guided or unguided, he offers
an enjoyable and normally
successful experience.

Contrary to what many people believe, pronghorns do cross fences both by jumping and going underneath.

A second later this buck wriggled underneath the wires.

end of my pronghorn hunting. I don't consciously try to hunt them every single year, but somehow it seems that I usually do. I've held many Wyoming tags, several Montana tags, a couple of Colorado tags, and I've hunted them in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas as well. I've taken a couple of really good ones along the way, but most of my pronghorns are just average bucks. This is partly because I don't always, or even very often, seek a tag in the best trophy areas. It is also partly because the pronghorn antelope is my very favorite of all wild meat! Far more important than my personal trophy statistics is the

simple fact that I have never, not once, been on an unsuccessful pronghorn hunt!

This suggests that pronghorns aren't the most difficult animals to hunt, and there is truth in this. There's really nothing wrong with success, however, provided it's obtained in the proper fashion. Pronghorn antelope have extraordinary vision and can be exceedingly hard to approach. On the other hand, they are quite visible in the open country they call home, and in most areas where they are hunted they are quite plentiful. Sometimes it takes a bit of work, and not every pronghorn spotted can be successfully stalked—but over the course of two or three days most pronghorn hunts will result in a cooler full of tasty venison.

Over the years most of my pronghorn hunting has been unguided, but certainly not all. A couple of years ago I got a wonderful buck with Mike Watkins and Fred Lamphere in eastern Montana, and I've had a couple of great guided hunts with Dick Mankin's outfit near Gillette, Wyoming. There is nothing inherently wrong with taking the guided hunt option for pronghorn. Guided hunts for this animal are generally inexpensive (an exception being really good tro-

phy areas that offer landowner permits), and of course a guided hunt greatly simplifies the requirement to research areas and access.

There is also nothing wrong with the unguided option for this animal. In fact, of all the western game species, the pronghorn is the animal that offers the best opportunity for the unconnected, unguided, do-it-yourself nonresident to enjoy a high-quality, successful hunting experience. There is excellent hunting for elk and mule deer on public land throughout the West, so do-it-yourself hunting is surely practical. But these days mule deer populations are hit-and-miss, with chances for a really good buck fairly slim in most areas. Elk populations are at an all-time high, so the opportunity is fabulous. But elk hunting is always difficult and weather-sensitive, and only hunters in exceptionally good condition can pack a bull out of the high country without assistance. The pronghorn is a bit more democratic. He dots the plains, where he can be seen and stalked. Not all areas, nor any area in all years, will produce



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record-class trophies. But all areas will produce nice, respectable trophies—and any good hunter, whether guided or unguided, should be able to find them.

A PLACE TO HUNT

Even in the mid-'60s we were extremely fortunate to find Lester Wright. Pronghorn country remains lonely country, and it isn't altogether impossible to go in "cold" and find a good place to hunt . . . but it's much more unlikely today. The first principle in planning almost any hunt is to make sure you have a place to hunt, and pronghorn hunting is certainly no different.

In fact, it may be even more important with pronghorns than with other western species, because a lot of the West's pronghorns are found on private land. This is where drawing a tag can get a bit tricky. For instance, there is quite a lot of public land that holds pronghorns in western Wyoming—Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land and the fringes of National Forest land. This is no secret, so a lot of units in western Wyoming offer fairly tough odds for drawing. Areas such as the Red Desert north of Baggs are not only largely public land, but also are known to produce exceptional trophies. They're tough to draw. Off in eastern Wyoming most land is

privately owned or, at best, a complex grid of deeded land and BLM sections. Pronghorn tags are easy to draw in most units in eastern Wyoming, with some units undersubscribed almost every year—but you'd better have a place to hunt before you show up with a tag in hand.

Any state that offers pronghorn tags can offer good hunting and good trophies. Some, like California and Kansas, reserve their few tags for residents only. Others, such as Oregon, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona, offer nonresident tags but odds for drawing are pretty slim. New Mexico's system of private land tags is extremely attractive—but the best ranches are leased by outfitters, and the opportunity for an unconnected nonresident to obtain one of these tags is very limited. West Texas' system is similar, except that the pronghorn population is much smaller and tags much more limited. I've never had any problem drawing Colorado pronghorn tags, but public land is limited in most of Colorado's pronghorn country and, unless you know someone, accessing

private land is difficult.

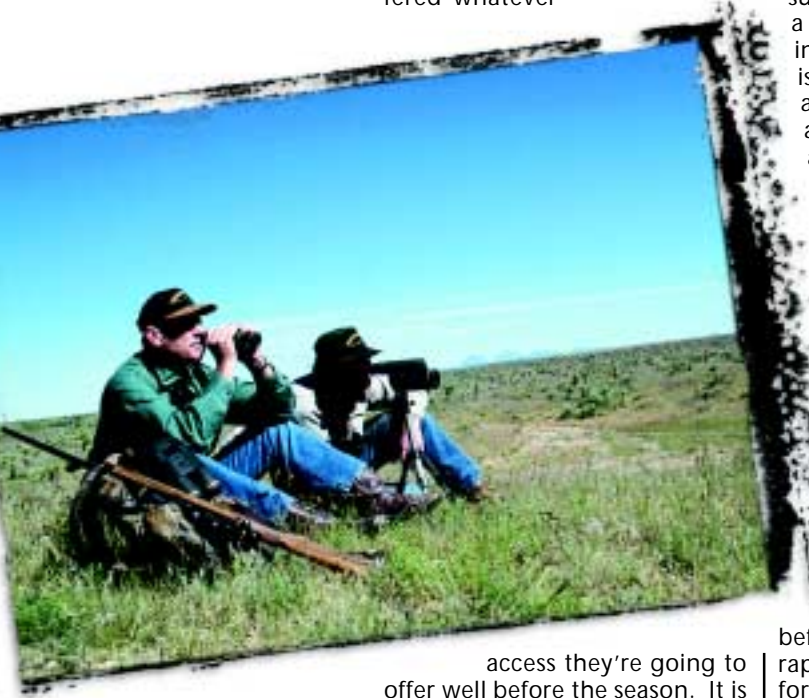
This brings us to Wyoming and Montana, the two states that, to my mind, offer the best opportunity for the unconnected, unguided nonresident to hunt pronghorn. Wyoming is probably "the" pronghorn state; excepting the mountains and forested areas, pronghorns are found darn near everywhere. The population is huge, and there are lots of tags. However, Montana shouldn't be overlooked. The bulk of the population lies in the eastern third of the state. Tags are reasonably easy to draw, and there is a lot of public land in some areas, such as the breaks of the Missouri and Musselshell Rivers. And here's a secret: it is my impression that, on average, eastern Montana produces somewhat better pronghorn trophies than eastern Wyoming. The country is bigger and wilder, and the logical answer is that eastern Montana's pronghorns probably aren't harvested quite as intensively.

It isn't really difficult to find a place to hunt pronghorns in either Wyoming or Montana. This doesn't mean that I recom-

...usually when pressured pronghorns will often take refuge in wide-open flats where a close approach is extremely difficult. I was able to take this buck from a little rise about 300 yards away, a fairly normal shot in pronghorn hunting.



mend driving around and knocking on doors the day before the season. As is the case everywhere else, some ranchers don't allow hunting, some have leased to outfitters, many reserve their game for family members and friends, and most who allow hunting will probably have offered whatever



A good spotting scope is as essential as good binoculars.

The best way to hunt pronghorns is very gently, observing them with good optics from as far away as possible and approaching only when you're reasonably certain you've found your buck.

access they're going to offer well before the season. It is much wiser to know exactly where you're going to hunt when you apply for your tag. Public land is a perfectly good option. You can get BLM sectionals and find areas with large amounts of public land, then match that to the game unit maps when you're applying for your tag. Private land is also a perfectly good option. Pronghorn country is big country in Wyoming and Montana. It isn't all held by outfitters, and ranchers who don't allow hunting are in the minority. In fact, hunting and visiting hunters' dollars are extremely important in the region. Some landowners will charge a trespass fee and some won't, but it isn't all that difficult to find a place to hunt. A good place to start is by placing calls to Chambers of Commerce in areas you're interested in hunting. Usually they'll be helpful, and so will local game wardens and wildlife biologists.

SCOUTING IS CRITICAL

Hopefully you've figured out where you're going to hunt far ahead of opening day . . . but that doesn't mean you know it. In unfamiliar country it's always best to put in a couple of days of

scouting before the season opens, and this is especially critical with pronghorns, this for several reasons.

First, pronghorns are relatively difficult to judge. You want to spend a bit of time studying them (from afar, with good optics) without opening-day pressure or excitement. The ears of a buck are usually about six inches from base to tip, which is helpful knowledge—but an awful lot of pronghorn bucks appear to have horns that rise about twice the ear length. Where you often get length is from the hook at the horn tips—how far the tips curl around, and how far the sharp tips drop down. Some pronghorns have straight horns with little hook, and these usually look longer than they are, while horns that hook well are often as much as two inches longer than they appear. Length of prongs is also extremely important, as is mass. You need to look over a number of pronghorns and compare one to another

before you can see these things rapidly, and this is best done before the season opens.

Second, pronghorns are extremely visible. You won't see all the bucks in a given area in a few scouting sessions, but you'll see a lot of them. Look hard at what you're seeing, because it will give you a good indication of the kind of bucks the area is producing. I believe pronghorns are extremely weather-sensitive. Bad winters can exact a terrible toll on the older bucks, and it's also possible that late springs or drought can retard horn growth, just as it can antler growth in deer.

In 1978 my Dad and I returned to Wright, Wyoming in the wake of several mild winters. We found the darndest crop of pronghorns I've ever seen, and we each took exceptional bucks. Even so, we shot too quickly. After our tags were filled we saw several bucks that were even bigger. The next year I went back with a buddy, fully expecting to take a record-class monster. It had been a hard winter and a late spring, and just a year later the biggest buck we saw barely exceeded 12 inches.

There are always surprises, but I've found horn quality to be fairly uniform within a given area. In other words, if you've scouted

around a lot and all the mature bucks seem to be about 12 or 13 inches, it's extremely unlikely that you'll find a 16 or 17-inch monster. Which means that, if you like antelope meat (and you should), then it's foolish to look for something that probably isn't there. On the other hand, if you're seeing lots of 14-inch antelope, you've hit a good area or a good year—maybe both. You might want to look around really carefully before you fill your tag, because there are probably a couple of very good bucks somewhere nearby. It is best to get this kind of feel for the current crop before the season.

Third, pronghorn are tough enough to stalk when undisturbed. It's pretty difficult to ensure that you'll have the entire prairie to yourself, so after the first few shots are fired it gets tougher. My ideal scenario would be to plan the hunt so I had two or three days of scouting before the season. I'd sort through the antelope in the area I could hunt and locate two or three of the better bucks. Then I'd hope to relocate the best of them shortly after dawn on opening day, make a stalk and hopefully fill my tag. If possible I'd allow a couple of more days for blown stalks or (heaven forbid) missed shots—but if time were short I'd cut a hunting day in favor of a scouting day.

CREATURES OF HABIT
The rolling sagebrush hills may look exactly the same to you and me, but not to pronghorns. They are not as habitual as deer, but they do have defined territories, and unless they are badly disturbed you can expect to find them in the same general area, usually at the same approximate times of day. They will generally water in the same place at about the same time (usually midday to early afternoon), which is critical knowledge for bowhunters and blackpowder hunters. Despite what you hear, they can jump fences. I've seen them do it, and they do it quite well. But usually they will go under a fence at long-established and well-used crossing sites, which is also useful knowledge.

Even when disturbed, they will often move in big circles, eventually coming back to their home territories—but it might be the next day, or the day after that, before they return.

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HUNT GENTLY

The best policy is always to observe pronghorns from afar, sizing them up without disturbing them, and planning a stalk if a buck seems worth a closer look. It's hard to say exactly how close you can get to pronghorns without disturbing them, but it's usually well beyond sensible shooting distance. If you can do your scouting, glassing, and judging from a minimum of a half-mile, you will probably not spook them. This means a good spotting scope and a sturdy tripod in addition to binoculars.

PLANNING THE STALK

To me, the real fun of pronghorn hunting is planning and executing a good stalk. In some areas you run into pronghorns out on wide-open flats where a stalk simply isn't possible. When this happens, you simply have to wait them out—and some areas are open enough that there is no guarantee that a stalk on a given buck will ever be possible. In my experience this is rare. Most of the time the prairie has enough little hills, folds, and gullies that a stalk is possible.

If a buck is moving, you may be able to plan an intercept;

if he's bedded, you may be able to get in on him. The key is reading the terrain well enough so that an unseen approach is possible. You cannot approach with the wind at your back, and you certainly should be quiet. Unlike many animals, the pronghorn's vision is his first line of defense. If you can stay out of sight, you can get close. If you can't stay out of sight, you probably cannot close within range.

Even so, if you "bump" a buck or blow a stalk it isn't the end of the world. Watch where he goes and try again. Here's where using your brain comes into play. You may want to give him some time to settle down, perhaps relocating him again from afar. But if he moves into broken ground, you may want to take advantage of the terrain and hotfoot it after him.

The best pronghorn buck I have ever taken was "bumped" in the early afternoon while we were driving down a ranch road. He trotted up and over a ridge and dropped out of sight. As soon as he was out of sight I ran

to the top of the ridge, crossed it a few hundred yards above where the buck had gone, and then made my way carefully down the gentle valley beyond. The buck hadn't gone far, and I shot him about an hour later.

The second-best buck I have ever taken liked a big, open flat that was almost within long rifle range of a willow-lined creek bottom. We stalked him along that creek three times. The first two times he was out of range, but the third time he was just close enough for a long shot.

You never know exactly what form a stalk on a pronghorn will take. You will probably blow some stalks, and you will surely wind up with knees and hands full of cactus spines. But pronghorns can be approached, and getting the drop on a good buck is the real fun of hunting them. An experienced guide or more experienced buddy can help immensely, but if you use your head, even a beginner can successfully hunt pronghorns. Chances are you'll keep hunting them, and you won't be a beginner anymore! ▲▲▲

This is my very best pronghorn, exceptionally heavy with good prongs.

A buddy of mine knew the ranch, which helped a lot, but this buck was taken on an unguided hunt.

