

# A Hunt to Remember

## The Story of the New World's Record Pronghorn

By David Meyer  
B&C Associate  
Photos courtesy of Author

When life gives you a second chance, you better take it. Being able to hunt at all in 2002 was miraculous; to be able to harvest a World's Record pronghorn was extraordinary.

Several years ago I underwent very serious surgery to remove a large mass in my chest, followed by a long recovery period that kept me from working, hunting, climbing stairs or even moving from a chair for quite some time. During this forced period of inactivity, I began thinking of a hunt for pronghorn. I extensively researched pronghorn, including their history and taxonomy (see sidebar). During this time I was able to review the Boone and Crockett's *Measuring and Scoring of the North American Big Game* along with the Club's records books, where I learned that the genetics of Arizona dominate the elite group of trophy-class pronghorn with trophies such as the exceptional heads harvested by O'Haco, Wetzler, Whittaker, Jaksick, and the more recent Barry buck. This led to our focus on Arizona as the location for my hunt.

After securing a pronghorn tag at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation auction in the spring, my scouting team in early June had observed and followed an exceptional pronghorn in area 13B. We reviewed film of this buck throughout the summer of 2002 and could not believe the estimated mass measurements of this antelope, which neared 50 inches [D1, 2, 3, 4].

With the home range of the buck established, there was great anticipation as our August hunt approached, but even with the increased intensity and multiple stalks during the first day of our hunt, we could not overcome the wariness of this large buck and when open to view could not close the distance.

We began our second day of hunting at daybreak through an opening in Hurricane Cliffs. There were four different small elevations in the terrain that allowed us to crawl undetected and locate a small group of pronghorn (six does and two young bucks), which the large buck had joined. Our prone

crawling on the shale did not improve our position, and our second stalk into the valley only allowed continued wayward movement of the herd. We could not close the distance to closer than 1,000 yards. We made more aggressive stalks that afternoon, but the doe's alarm protected our buck and we lost contact with it. John Caid, my guide, and I decided we should return to the outer part of the cliff, climbing to the top and glassing at each interval to view the valley, and then fixing our course by the direction and move-



The photographs above were taken during a scouting trip in June 2002.

ment of the does.

We circled the cliff and then dropped down toward Square Pond, believing their movement could be back to water. As it began to rain, we saw the movement of the lead doe over the next ridge where the group, including the large buck, had bedded down. It had now been 12 hours of stalking, and we felt we were close. We carefully moved to the next small ridge of elevation, and then the big buck was there, and moving toward us!

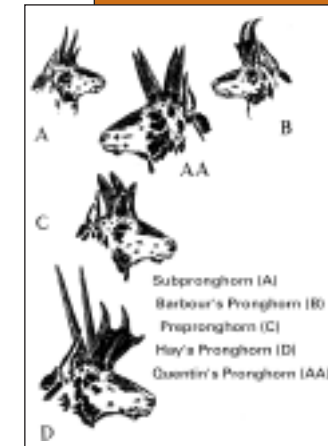
The pronghorn came closer than I would have believed. I could not control my breathing, and I was standing without a rest. I have always been able to shoot well, with or without a rest, as I had been privileged to hunt whitetail deer, and equally great experiences without success for Coues' deer in the past. As he came closer and caught us by sight, his white rump elevated as he paced and turned slightly. I shot, and he disappeared into the sage. I knew I had missed.

It was not the physical exhaustion, but the feeling that I had failed all the wonderful people that had helped me get this far. I kept replaying the sighting and shot in my mind in slow motion. "I should have waited until he stopped; I should have been in a sitting position with a rest; I should not have shot at all until he was closer; I should have controlled my breathing; I should have..." I wondered if I would ever see or have the opportunity to be that close again.

**I hope the genes of this animal will remain viable and strong. There are recent reports of an even more significant pronghorn, and certainly in the future a higher score will be recorded. But for me, there will be no greater thrill than that morning of August 9th, and no hunting experience that will equal that day.**

## ORIGINS OF PRONGHORN

The origins of the pronghorn are truly fascinating. From the literature and speaking to many people with knowledge of this species, I learned that this new world mammal is the sole survivor of 13 genera within the family *Antilocapra*. This family to which pronghorn belongs originated 23.8 million years ago, during the mid-Miocene period of global warming and new grasslands. The species of antelope that we see today probably descended from a group of American horn-bearers from the age of mammals, described by Frick in 1937. It is the description in 1934 from a Pleistocene cave deposit in



southern Arizona that provided horn cores of a new species of antilocaprine [*Tetrameryx onusrosagris*] similar in appearance to the antelope identified in 1902 by Theodore Roosevelt and others in *The Deer Family*. In 1942, Skinner confirmed these findings in *The Fauna of Papago Springs Cave*, which revealed the recognized phenotype of the four-horned antelope.

While the origins of antilocaprids [Gray, 1886] can only be traced to North America, they exhibit many parallels with gazelles in their behavior as open habitat [grasslands, brush lands, and deserts] ruminants. The evolution of the pronghorn and their amazing adaptation through a four million year history is documented by Byers in his work of over a decade as the *Ghosts of Predators Past*. We learned that *Antilocapra americana's* legendary eyesight is equivalent to eight power. Their speed, which can reach up to 55 miles per hour, coupled with their enlarged heart chambers create a cardiovascular system four times that of an equivalent mammal, and with the mitochondria density found within their muscle cells allows this prairie racer to burn oxygen at a turbocharged rate.

Frick's exceptional treatise in 1937 included 7,000 specimens of our American horn-bearers from the *Age of Mammals* and the eight wonderful plates of Joseph M. Guerry that are hypothesized and reconstructed from the fossil remains of *Antilocapriini*.

1870, one railroad observer describes a herd that covered a 70-mile expanse, but by 1920 only an estimated 35,000 individual animals remained. As dramatically illustrated in *Survivors from Another World*, *Antilocapra* encountered many known predators over greater than three million years. But even with the trust antelope place in their eyesight and their evolutionary-developed speed, Mr. Roosevelt, in the *Wilderness Hunter*, described the loss of the great herds from our plains: "As with all other American game, man is a worse foe to the pronghorn than all their brute enemies combined..."

Today, due to conservation efforts, the pronghorn population has shown a gain in numbers and is estimated by some reports to be as high as one million. The combined 41 papers from 1942 through 1977 compiled by Yoakum and Salinger on behalf of The Wildlife Society are informative and detail the methodology of the pronghorn's remarkable recovery. Despite this significant recovery in population, one of the three species [*A.a. mexicana*] remains on CITES Appendix 1 with an estimated remaining herd of 1200 and the Sonoran subspecies has been on the U.S. ESA and IUCN endangered listing since June of 1970. The pronghorn antelope is the only remaining free ranging species specific in origin to our American west.



This specimen from the 1921 Lagow pit site identified the Pleistocene antelope cores from over one million years ago. By permission of the Shuler Museum of Paleontology [No. 60004].



Guide, John Caid, and the author, David Meyer, with the New World's Record pronghorn taken in Mohave County, Arizona, in August 2002. The buck officially scores 95 points.

On the 9th of August, eight days following our initial stalk, we had planned a new approach. There were a series of serpentine-like washes that were bone dry from the drought. It seemed that morning slowed forever, arising from each gully to sight the

empty green sagebrush of the plateaus.

After the fourth of these attempts, there was movement beyond the clay as it blended into the sage. I sighted a prominent bush, near which there was movement. One smaller buck moved, but I could not see the larger buck. It seemed that I had stared at that bush forever, though it had actually been less than an hour. At first only the protrusion of two horns appeared above the boundary between clay and grass. Finally, the large buck appeared. It had moved considerably toward us, and John quietly ranged the buck at 178 yards.

Then the pronghorn stopped moving. I wondered whether the buck could see us, but it appeared that it was looking beyond us. Then it turned, quartering to my call, and did not move. Before hearing the shot, it went down, and the herd that was bedded down came up and was gone. We waited, but there was no movement above the grass. We did not move for a few minutes and silently observed with respect this wonderful buck. After caping the animal and dividing the meat for our families, we measured the antelope's horns. I had estimated the size of these horns so many times since the films of June that I could not

believe the actual field measurements were accurate. They were staggering, and the heaviness of his horns appeared massive.

Based on an incisor sent to the laboratory, the age of the animal was determined to be three years, five months, approximating half the age estimated by Arizona Game and Fish, who had trapped this pronghorn in January of 2000 in the Prescott Valley area [19A] and transplanted it within the genetic relocation program into the 13B area. A Boone and Crockett Official Measurer scored the horns, and his office guided the completion of our application for the 25th Awards Program. A Boone and Crockett Special Judges Panel was convened in May of 2003, and verified the score and certified this trophy as a new World's Record pronghorn. We have been privileged to be invited to the Awards Program next year, and this trophy will be on display with other new World's Records at the 25th Awards Program in Kansas City.

I hope the genes of this animal will remain viable and strong. There are recent reports of an even more significant pronghorn in this area, and certainly in the future a higher score will be recorded. But for me, there will be no greater thrill

than that morning of August 9th, and no hunting experience that will equal that day. From the first reference I read on pronghorn antelope during the first steps of my recovery, and being able to review the scouting of our group, the stalking, the failure, and then the success of the harvest of this pronghorn, all those who helped me along the path will always be remembered. And this most memorable experience allows me to think back to some words written a long time ago by Robert Drake in *The Delta Review*:

"But it's joy that somehow takes you outside yourself, maybe even for a minute lets you forget all about yourself and care only for something else . . . And you rejoice simply that some things can be . . . And that is the most wonderful thing in the world and it don't happen often, 'I can tell you.'"

This was truly a time and a hunt to remember. ■

**EDITOR'S NOTE:**

For a complete bibliography of the 20 references that were used to write this story and the acknowledgements, please send an e-mail request to [jthouk@boone-crockett.org](mailto:jthouk@boone-crockett.org).



Buck Buckner, Chairman of the Records of North American Big Game Committee, verifying the score of Meyer's pronghorn at the Special Judges Panel in May of 2003.

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