

Pronghorn *on FOOT*

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Author making memories of the wide-open prairie and looking forward to that trophy on his wall.

I don't like hunting from a vehicle. Understandably, there are times when a hunter can't do without a truck if he wants to hunt a certain species or area effectively, but nothing bores me more than driving around when there's perfectly good stalking to be done. It reminds me too much of my daily commute.

There seems to be a general belief that hunting pronghorn should consist of driving to a location then glassing over section after section of land to find a decent animal. However, I'm convinced that this approach, while helpful for determining pronghorn hot-spots in the preseason, is not the best or most enjoyable way to hunt them. If you have ever climbed a hill in prairie country and marveled at the endless sequence of rises, draws, creek bottoms, and gullies, it is not hard to imagine how many pronghorn you will miss when glassing from the road.

"An exciting target for the trophy hunter who brings down a buck after a grueling stalk, the pronghorn is too often taken the easy way—chased by motor vehicles and butchered by strafing fire."

—Charles F. Waterman

I dreamed of hunting pronghorn since I visited my friends Niki and Keith Atcheson in their prairie hunting camp east of Lewistown, Montana, in October 2003. Every day we saw hundreds of pronghorn in bands of four or five and in huge herds of up to a 150 animals, and the gale-force winds, snow, and temperatures between -10° and -20° F couldn't cool my enthusiasm for these wanderers of the prairies. Like ghosts in the snow, their bodies effortlessly floated up and over the hills, and out of sight.

So when Atcheson suggested I enter the pronghorn draw for his area in 2005, it didn't take me long to get on the net and apply. Unfortunately, something went wrong and my name didn't get entered. Going by the traditional route of filling out a real form with a pen and sending a money order, I was lucky the next year.

"To observe a herd of pronghorns is like watching a flock of birds sailing low over the prairie."

—J.Y. Jones

On that Wednesday morning in 2006, I started off early toward the Wild Horse border crossing and Atcheson's camp, hoping to get some scouting done that same afternoon. However, I pulled into camp after sundown—forgetting your wallet, adding 300 miles to the trip, will do that.

The next day, Atcheson was guiding a father and son from Indiana on a two-day pronghorn hunt, which left me to wander on my own. The ranch lands that Atcheson hunts sit on the border between the prairies and a few high and steep ridges. Having just returned from a moose hunt, where I spent most of the time in the truck glassing cut blocks, it was refreshing to be able to strike out on foot, hike along a ridge, and glass the gullies and flats. The sun was out, the morning crisp, and the view gorgeous.

A herd of 23 pronghorn moved past the easternmost tip of the butte on to a neighboring ranch. I saw one decent buck in that group. Another 12 pronghorn were bedded north of our lease, and further east another group of some 35 pronghorn was grazing. A promising start!

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Enjoying the views and the sun

"It's going to be tough hunting this year," Keith explained over lunch. "East of our hunting area a fire scorched off the old prairie grasses, and fresh green sprouts have attracted pronghorn from all over the county.

"There must be a thousand of them on that burn, and they are hardly traveling. You'd better not be passing up too many animals."

I was skeptical. Hadn't I seen thousands of these pronghorn within shooting range just three years ago? That afternoon, I hiked back up the ridge. Glassing around, I counted about 150 mule deer grazing in the little valley behind the ranch, and some 80 more north of the butte. Two red foxes played on the hill in front of me, and a small band of pronghorn traveled way out of range from gully to gully. I just sat there and enjoyed the scenery and wildlife, while the sun warmed my face.

I'd almost forgotten I was there to hunt, until the group of 23 reappeared. They were moving toward me! Through the spotting scope I looked at individual animals. A black-faced buck kept bringing up the rear, and he was clearly the biggest in the group. The herd kept on its southeastern course, to where the ridge flattened out onto the prairie. I had to force myself to keep watching them until it was certain that they weren't headed anywhere else.

Quickly I packed up and started running along the ridge, peeking over the top every once in a while to see where they were. They were picking up speed! Good thing it was downhill for me. Yet, as I slapped down the pack on the last bit of elevation that provided cover, the first does were already out of range! The buck was lagging behind. I found him in the rifle scope and flipped off the safety. Then he stopped and looked my way.

I couldn't shoot him. It was too early in the hunt, the distance too great, he wasn't big enough, I was using an unfamiliar borrowed rifle; or all of the above. Anyway, a few seconds later the buck joined his damsels, and they crossed the fence onto a neighboring ranch. It was a great feeling to have outsmarted him though, and I hiked back whistling.

"No other kind of plains game ... is as shy and sharp-sighted as the pronghorn; and both its own habits and the open nature of the ground in which it is found render it peculiarly difficult to stalk."

—Theodore Roosevelt

The next morning we woke up to a gusty wind and rain, which quickly turned

to snow. My hope that I'd find some pronghorn bedded out of the wind at the foot of the ridge proved wrong. I hung around for a few hours, peeking over ridges, and scrutinizing out-of-the-wind pockets, until the memory of Niki's breakfast with game sausage, pepper bacon, eggs, and biscuits, and the lure of the propane heater became too strong. A mule deer doe with two fawns didn't even bother to get out of my way. I passed them at a stone's throw.

Their clients on their way back home, Niki and Keith made a groceries run. I hunted around the lower slopes of another butte, the last of a range of hills that gave way to seemingly endless plains. Hiking up and around the butte, I glassed the gullies from above, passing dozens of mule deer. A young buck was feeling some early rutting jitters, following a doe around until she took off running.

The early-morning snow had all but melted off. On the east side of the butte I found the old burn. A huge green patch, speckled with tiny beige spots, brightened up the dull brown prairie. Through

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—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

the spotting scope, the spots turned into pronghorn. Hundreds of them! I gave up counting at 500.

It was a magnificent sight, but equally disheartening; all these pronghorn were on land I couldn't access. I was getting serious doubts about passing up yesterday's buck.

Coming back down off the butte, I saw three female pronghorn browsing about a mile and a half away. I had purchased two additional doe tags, and this would be an ideal occasion to get one without disturbing too many other animals. However, when I finally peeked over the last rise they were gone. There wasn't a tumbleweed to hide behind, yet they had managed to disappear unseen.

"...stalking trophy antelope in big country not overrun by hunters is a grand experience." —Jack O'Connor

Help arrived that same day when Joel Boniek came in from Alaska, where he had been guiding for sheep. In the morning he went out ahead of me to scout for antlered animals, while I waited for more light, in case any pronghorn were feeding on the alfalfa field close to the farm.

Going out, I scared off the resident whitetails and sent a dozen mule deer scurrying for the other side of the fence. Up ahead a few lighter-colored shapes crossed the long driveway. Pronghorn!

As I came closer and looked into the neighbor's field, a high-and-wide buck stopped and looked back at me, as if he knew he was safe in one field and not in the other.

I let them walk over a rise and then stalked up a little hill, hoping that the group would keep moving and come onto our ranch. No such luck. To add to my misery, from behind the hill, and out of range, another group with two bucks in it trotted over to the fence, slipped underneath and started grazing. But at least not all the pronghorn were hanging out at that burn.

"Of all kinds of hunting the chase of the pronghorn is pre-eminently that requiring skill in the use of the rifle at long range."

—Theodore Roosevelt

When pronghorn hunting is good, the next chance is never far away. I found Boniek at a vantage point overlooking the plains. He pointed out a group of four to me: two does, a young buck, and a short, but massive, buck.

"He's not very high, but he's got good mass, and nice prongs," Boniek said.

I replied, "I guess the best way to approach him would be to start from that

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"I looked at the pronghorn, three quarters of a mile away..."

farmhouse over there, and work my way up through that creek bed."

"That's a big detour," he said, "it may take too long. You could try to get down here, in full view, and try to get out of sight as quickly as possible. If that works, you can walk all the way up to that little rise, and probably get within rifle range relatively easy."

I looked at the pronghorn, three quarters of a mile away. Surely they wouldn't catch me going down the flank of our look-out point from that far away. I bent over, hoping to resemble a four-legged critter from afar, and started down the hill.

I slipped down the slope, keeping an eye on them. For a while it looked like one locked on to me, but the others kept grazing. It took a long time to get down below the rise and out of sight of the pronghorn. All the time I walked hunched over, my arms stretched downward.

As I crawled up the side of the depression to take a look, the young buck was staring in my direction. Niki had loaned me her rangefinder, a gizmo I had never used before, and I tried to get a reading. The first attempt read 270 yards. The second try was 830 yards. No reading the third time. Disgusted, I put the thing back into my pack.

"When in doubt, get closer," I thought and circled around along a barely visible dip in the flats. However, cover quickly ran out, and I started to belly crawl. The sparse grass was about as high as my head, as long as I kept my nose in with the cactus.

The young buck was alert. He started fake grazing, throwing up his head, trying to catch me moving. Shooting from prone was impossible as they were just behind a little ripple, and all I saw were the tops of their backs. My pack wasn't filled enough to provide a rest. Then a snow shower moved in. Visibility dropped, and the wind swirled.

Finally, the young buck couldn't take it anymore, and he bolted. The group trotted off, with the older buck in the rear.

"When a pronghorn looks like he is just loafing along, he's likely to be moving 30

miles per hour... It's been a lot of years since I shot at a running pronghorn."

—Craig Boddington

I quickly sat up, rested the rifle on my knees, and tried to find the buck in the scope. More snow, more wind. The old buck stopped. I shot.

Desperately, I called out: "Hey! Buck! Hey!" The whole group stopped and turned. Forcing myself to use the extra second, I took a deep breath. After the second shot, three ran off, one stayed behind. Hit hard, the buck turned away, while I grabbed for new ammo. Then he bedded down. A quick finisher from up close put him down.

"I've put grizzlies, moose, elk and black bears down with one or two bullets from a .303 British. This pronghorn took three of the 180-grain bullets in a 500-yard chase with me running after it."

—Mike Crammond

As Boniek had described, the buck wasn't tremendously high, but he was massive, with a funny back sticker, and gorgeous ivory tips. I'll take mass and character over inches anytime.

We took some pictures, and I transported the whole field dressed buck, strapped to Boniek's pack frame, back to the truck in one haul.

The next morning, time had come to leave. The two doe tags remained unused. Three deer hunters and one elk hunter had taken over camp for opening Sunday. As the hunting parties moved off into the pre-dawn darkness, I steered my Toyota onto the long and muddy driveway, hoping I'd be able to return soon. Pronghorn hunting is addictive. In a good area, you can hunt all day long, see lots of game, and get plenty of chances to prove your stalking skills.

However, do yourself a favor: find a good area, park your truck, and move out on foot. Stay off the skyline, and keep your belly to the ground when you crawl. And when you look at that trophy on the wall, you'll remember the smell of sage, feel the sting of cactus, and see the wide-open prairie. ■