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Photos Courtesy of Rebecca Spring



PRONGHORN

Pronghorn is probably the most straightforward western species to hunt on your own. While they are commonly (though incorrectly) called antelope (and also oftentimes referred to as speed goats or goats), they are more closely related to giraffes than Africa's true antelope species. *Antilocarpa americana* has a couple of very unique traits that are extremely interesting. First, they are the only species that loses its horns every year. Secondly the pronghorn reaches maturity at 3 years, meaning with the right conditions, a third-year pronghorn has the potential to express his largest set of horns. Interestingly, a pronghorn's age is easily determined to age 3 as each year they add an additional front incisor until they reach maturity.

I am clearly intrigued by this species for its uniqueness and also the fact that pronghorn are only found on the North American continent. Their popularity is relatively low compared to many other western species, which can work to the visiting hunter's advantage. Especially in areas of high abundance, access can usually be obtained. Although the same rancher that will gladly let you on for pronghorn is more likely to give you some of his water or a date with his daughter than permission to hunt mule deer.



The author with a fine opening day Montana pronghorn.

IN MANY CASES, A LARGE PORTION OF YOUR SCOUTING WILL BE DONE AHEAD OF SEASON AT FAIRLY LONG DISTANCES, SO A QUALITY SPOTTER WILL BE YOUR BEST PIECE OF EQUIPMENT. OUR FAVORITE UNITS ARE HEAVILY FARMED AND RELATIVELY FLAT WITHOUT MUCH IN TERMS OF COULEES OR COVER.



All western states other than Washington have huntable pronghorn populations, though some have significantly more opportunity than others. The first state that is usually considered for pronghorn is Wyoming, and rightfully so, with over half the pronghorn in the United States found within the borders of the Cowboy State. With lower populations as of late, tag numbers have dropped and prevented the long list of leftover tags that was available when I first hunted pronghorn there in 2006, though plenty of opportunities still exist.

Montana is probably the second-best option for pronghorn, and while it has the second largest population of pronghorn, it is still around 25 percent of Wyoming's.

While other states have opportunities and some quality trophy potential, all our pronghorn experience has been in the two states mentioned. So the tactics I will discuss I know work here, and I can assume could be utilized in most locations.

First, pronghorn are active all day long. In early

seasons, they will bed during the day, but unlike most ungulates, they are mostly inactive at night. Generally speaking, the only reason we have ever been in the field well before daylight was to try and get into position for a shot on a highly visible large buck on opening day that we were concerned may have caught the attention of other hunters.

Our best success for the bigger 80-plus class pronghorn has involved extensive scouting with neither my wife nor I making it past noon on opening day before punching a tag on our target buck. We have taken some friends that weren't as fortunate to locate animals as quickly, but all the largest bucks have fallen on opening weekend.

If I was scheduling vacation to hunt pronghorn, I would make sure I had five or six days in the unit before hunting started. This gives me an opportunity to inventory what is on the landscape, and develop a list of my top three or four shooter bucks in case access or a local's prowess knocks off one or two before I get my opportunity.



The biggest issue while scouting is to remember that mass and cutters are far more important to score than length and is also a sign of a mature buck. A tall pronghorn with high cutters may catch a novice's eye but generally are less mature and should be passed. Depending on the topography and access, in many cases, a large portion of your scouting will be done ahead of season at fairly long distances, so a quality spotter will be your best piece of equipment. Our favorite units are heavily farmed and relatively flat without much in terms of coulees or cover, so a few long weekends give us a pretty good inventory of bucks available. The key is covering ground,

and in that situation, a fair amount of time is spent on a window mount. A few of our areas in Montana have a couple hidden basins that a few hundred yards on foot give you a far more inclusive vantage point, but in our area, these are the rarity. In Wyoming, getting a couple hundred yards away from the road was the key to getting eyes on bucks. In addition to allowing us to inventory horn growth and pick out the more mature bucks, it also allows us time to research access if we find something in an area we don't have permission on yet.

Many pronghorns make their living on private land where much of this ground is in agriculture

production. Finding a landowner ahead of time generally results in higher success in obtaining permission than knocking on a door opening morning. In our case, we have found and built relationships with a couple landowners. Last year they quit giving permission to new hunters due to the disrespect they felt from someone who pounded on

their door at daylight on opening day. Fortunately we had built respect, and they still allow us to hunt. But keep this in mind: in a case like this, not only have you lost your opportunity to hunt, but you run the risk of getting permission revoked for other hunters as well, due to poor ethics.

Now this isn't to say we have never gained permission during season if a buck moved to a new property. In one case, we came across the landowner by chance on a county road, and after talking a bit, even though he had a tag in his pocket, he let my wife go after and take her best buck on his ground.

Once you have found a buck that you are interested in going after, be patient. Pronghorn

are highly curious and active all day. In the rut, we have seen two types of behavior. Either a mature buck will have a harem of does that will generally be fairly easy to spot and stay somewhat anchored. The second option we have seen was a buck that basically never rutted. He stayed in the same field all archery season, then moved less than a mile once rifle season started.

As much as they are homebodies when unpressured, in areas with high hunter density they can go anywhere—and will—once folks start pushing them around.

From my observations, I suspect a large portion of their range is driven by water availability. In early seasons, pronghorn will stay near their favorite water source. They may wander a bit from it to feed, but they will always return. Keep in mind though that the timing isn't like a whitetail. My first archery pronghorn hunt my target buck showed about 20 minutes past daylight, I choked

just as big as when he came back the next day around 11 a.m. but from a different direction both days.

In one of my favorite areas, where we have taken two great bucks, including an 85-inch All-time monster, there is a small sanctuary ravine with a year-round stock tank at the bottom. Early in the day pronghorns are always either above or below feeding but as soon as the first vehicle drives this main county road, they drop out of sight for the rest of the day but never go more than maybe 150 yards out of sight.

One thing I must pass along for pronghorn is that the table quality is top-notch, assuming certain rules are followed. First, they need to be skinned out and cooled rather quickly. Considering a very mature buck is still only going to tip the scale in the low 100-pound range, I think many folks figure they will cool without removing the hide but this is not the case. Secondly, pronghorn have



TOP: A solid All-time record book pronghorn taken in 2017 by the author's hunting buddy Jake Crow. LEFT: After 15 years of unsuccessful pronghorn applications in Oregon, the author's dad, Rick, took his first pronghorn in Montana, in 2016. BOTTOM: After chasing this buck all archery season, the author's wife Rebecca sealed the deal on day 1 of the rifle hunt in 2012.



adapted a 'radiator' where blood passes through the front of the nose before entering the brain to cool which allows them to stay at top speed for extended distances. This ability to run for extensive distances will cause a buildup of lactic acid, and in my experience this can taint the meat very quickly.

Pronghorn venison is our favorite meat, but realistically the last one we will share with friends. We have had some, though, that the flavor wasn't amazing—a pronghorn that was skinned and cooled quickly but had been run. A family friend had this buck run to him by another group of hunters a few miles away. He wasn't concerned with top trophy quality and after missing a buck on opening day, he really wanted to fill a tag, so when the opportunity presented, he took advantage. It wasn't ruined but it had a gamey taste that I feel many folks associate with bad pronghorn (or venison for that matter).

While relatively recent work completed in Wyoming

and Montana has shown these critters will migrate a fair amount, a scouting trip or a call to a local landowner will tell you what you need to know. Pronghorn are very visible and either driving around yourself or making a couple phone calls will let you know what is available.

The pronghorn's curiosity has led many to their demise. During my very first goat hunt, we spotted a young buck at well over 1,000 yards. Being very green, we had chatted with some locals the night before at the hotel watering hole in Sheridan, Wyoming. They suggested we buy a case of beer, go to a high point and hang a handkerchief off the antenna of the truck and guaranteed we would have two dead pronghorn before the case of beer was gone. While we bought them a round for their information, we clearly had no intention of hunting them this way. Though when we found ourselves pinned on a ridge top at far too great a distance for a shot, my wife took off her orange bandana and began walking out the

ridge flipping it high above her head. As I watched the buck through my binos, he clearly was enthralled with this bouncing orange flag. Once she was far enough down the ridge, I was able to slide over the edge and down into coulees to close the distance.

The plan worked to perfection, and though he wasn't quite what I wanted, the buck charged past me at no more than 50 paces. We had worked out hand signals so my wife could signal me in on the buck in case I couldn't get eyes on him in-close. What we didn't cover was the signal for, "he literally is going to run you over." My wife decided the correct action in this case was both hands in the air flailing and kicking every time she got off the ground. At this point, the buck was clearly very interested and actually ran into her rifle range as well, but she also realized he wasn't all that big.

From that experience, we learned distracting a goat isn't difficult at all and have used that knowledge to our advantage many times. A

hunter crawling through the wheat stubble or sage on their belly will generally cause the pronghorn to take a few steps closer to investigate. This both allows you a shot opportunity if in range and also signals they have spotted you and you can adjust your approach technique accordingly.

That being said, decoys, be it cow or pronghorn during an archery hunt, can also be quite successful. What most hunters don't realize is that pronghorn are actually quite vocal as well. While we have never had success calling a mature buck in, we have decoyed in many and have made calls correctly where the buck will flare his rump hair and face the opposite way and lie down. It's as if to say, "I know your there and not worth my time." This also can give you an opportunity—regardless of weapon—to close the distance during the rut.

We have found quality pronghorn in Wyoming and eastern Montana on state land, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Montana Block Management,

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Wyoming walk-in hunting, and private ground, where access only took a knock and a smile. We have also found some areas on Forest Service land that held pronghorn out and about but have never hunted them there.

The final consideration on pronghorn hunts is the ground they live on will turn impassable with very little rain. Known as gumbo, even mainline roads will turn into a slimy mess in a hurry. The years you are hit with rain on opening weekend can create a mess with your plans. First problem is you may not be able to get within 10 or 15 miles of where you want to be. In addition, every other hunter will be limited to pavement or very heavily graveled roads.

Many areas of the unit may not have any of these access options, meaning everybody that has traveled to hunt will be congregated where they can get. A later season hunt may have freezing temperatures at night that will freeze the gumbo, which allows access, but as soon as the sun hits and it starts to warm, you won't be going anywhere until either warm temperatures combined with wind to dry out the ground, or it freezes again the following evening.

There is no reason that with some planning and patience that you won't be able to find yourself midway through a stalk with grasshoppers and antelope dung in your face closing the distance on a great buck. Good luck! ■

TOTAL COST

REALISTICALLY, FOR MOST HUNTERS, THE EQUIPMENT NEEDED AND COSTS FOR A PRONGHORN HUNT ARE VERY REASONABLE. TAGS AND LICENSES ARE GENERALLY UNDER \$500 TOTAL FOR A NON-RESIDENT, AND MOST FOLKS DRIVE A VEHICLE AND BRING CAMPING EQUIPMENT OR STAY IN THE LOCAL HOTEL. A WEEK OFF WORK SHOULD GIVE YOU PLENTY OF TIME TO SCOUT AND TAKE A DECENT BUCK. QUALITY OPTICS IS WHERE I WOULD SPEND MOST OF MY BUDGET.

You can see pronghorn at very long distances, and many folks assume this habitat requires the ability to shoot as far as one can see, but this is not the case. Quality optics will allow you to judge bucks at long distances and then pick apart the landscape to plan your approach. In all the pronghorn hunts I have been involved with, we have only had to shoot beyond 375 yards one time. The majority of bucks have fallen in that 150- to 250-yard range, with a few under 50 yards mixed in. My wife got her best buck when she was able to belly crawl from 600 yards to within 225 in wheat stubble, where she killed the buck with a single prone shot when he stood to stretch.

MANY PRONGHORNS MAKE THEIR LIVING ON PRIVATE LAND WHERE MUCH OF THIS GROUND IS IN AGRICULTURE PRODUCTION. FINDING A LANDOWNER AHEAD OF TIME GENERALLY RESULTS IN HIGHER SUCCESS IN OBTAINING PERMISSION THAN KNOCKING ON A DOOR OPENING MORNING.

NEXT UP: BLACK BEAR

