

FIELD

With only a few inches separating a good buck from a records-book buck, know your field judging techniques and don't skimp on optics.

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JUDGING

By Jay Lesser

PRONGHORN THE SIXTH IN A SERIES

Having been born and raised in the great state of Wyoming, pronghorn have played a significant role in my development as a hunter and more importantly in my development as a selective hunter. Ever since I became old enough to hunt big game, pronghorn licenses have been readily available to Wyoming residents in many areas of the state, and consequently I've hunted pronghorn every season to date. As a matter of fact, a mature buck pronghorn was the first big game animal that I ever harvested.

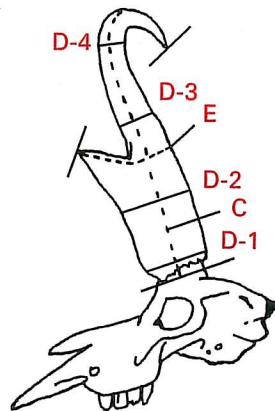
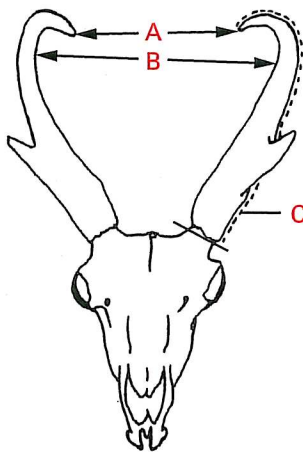
I guess it only seems natural that with all the pronghorn hunting I've done, that I would become increasingly selective in choosing a buck, a trait that has transferred over to all of my other hunting endeavors as well.

In the late 1980s I decided that I was willing to invest the time and effort that it would take to try to find a records-book quality pronghorn in Wyoming. My research showed that a number of very good buck pronghorn had been taken in the Red Desert, which encompasses a large portion of the southwestern quarter of the state. Licenses in the prime areas were a lot harder to draw than I was used to, but I decided to start applying for an area in Sweetwater County and I was delighted when I drew a license the first year.

That first Red Desert hunt was very educational. I found out that my chosen area was huge and that some parts of it were overflowing with pronghorn while other parts seemed completely devoid of them, yet everywhere you looked there seemed to be wild horses. I personally witnessed wild horses guarding water holes from the pronghorn and viscously chasing them away if they dared to approach the precious life-giving elixir, which might explain the lack of pronghorn in some of the more arid parts of the area.

Eventually, like most of the other hunters in the area, I concentrated my efforts in the places where there were a lot of pronghorn, and I finally chose to take a very respectable buck that scored in the upper 70s. While not a records-book buck, it was the largest pronghorn I had taken up to that time and it was certainly enough of an incentive for me to want to hunt the area again.

I continued to apply for the same area as my first choice for several more years before I finally drew another license, and coincidentally when it arrived in the mail I



UNDERSTANDING A PRONGHORN FRAME

- A – Tip to Tip Spread
- B – Inside Spread of Main Beams
- C – Length of Horn
- D – Circumferences
- E – Length of Prong

had just finished reading the book, *Mostly Huntin'* by the legendary lawman and outdoor writer Bill Jordan. In chapter three, Jordan described his hunt in the Red Desert where he harvested a records-book pronghorn. Even more coincidentally, I was scheduled to guide Bill Jordan on a varmint hunt just a few weeks later. During the varmint hunt, Bill revealed to me that the huge buck he had taken had indeed come from my chosen hunting area, and he showed me the exact location on a map. A short time later I acquired more detailed maps of the area and I literally planned my next hunt on my kitchen table. I studied the maps frequently, noting the locations of water sources and plotting routes through likely looking topography in the exact location that Jordan had taken his fine buck years earlier. As far as the map was concerned, there was only one water source in the entire drainage, a small natural reservoir approximately two miles from the end of the nearest road. That small reservoir was to be the central point of my quest for a records-book pronghorn.

Bright and early the day before the season began, my 13-year-old son Chad and I loaded our truck with hunting gear, camping gear, food, water, extra fuel cans, and a second spare tire. We drove the 200 miles from our home to the last small town with a gas station where we filled up the truck and our extra fuel cans before turning onto the dirt road that would eventually lead us to our chosen location. As we bumped and jarred over the dusty roads, we saw fewer and fewer pronghorn the deeper we traveled into the area, but we also saw less and less sign of recent human travel, which was exactly what Bill Jordan had told me to expect. He had also said that while I shouldn't expect to see a lot of pronghorn, the ones that were there were worth looking for.

Late that afternoon we arrived at our pre-chosen campsite and immediately set up camp. That's when we discovered that while we had brought our tent, we had forgotten our tent poles. The first night wasn't bad, it was still and clear, and we slept in our sleeping bags under the stars. However, that was the only pleasant



The author's son, Chad, proudly poses with the gray-legged buck.

Obviously, estimating the horn dimensions on a pronghorn is truly a top-quality optics game, especially when you consider that there are not many inches separating a good buck from a records-book buck.

FIELD JUDGING

night we had because every night after that the wind stirred up the dirt and blew it like a sand blaster until just before sunrise. This means that we spent every night sleeping upright in the seat of my single cab pickup truck.

Early the first morning of the season we drove the last few miles from our camp to the end of the road, then we set out walking a course that would take us to the fabled lone reservoir. We carefully peeked over the top of each new rise and glassed each new area as it unfolded before us. After covering about a half-mile, we spotted a lone buck standing in the distance on a parched knoll. Chad and I eased into the shade of a convenient bush, set up my spotting scope, and focused it on the buck. The first two things I noticed were the height of his horns and that his legs were a dark slate gray color. However, due to the heat mirage, I couldn't be sure that his horns were as long as they appeared, and I couldn't tell what made

his legs the unusual gray color. A few moments later, the buck turned and disappeared over the knoll. We hurried to the place where we had last seen him, but he had vanished in what was to become his trademark maneuver. We continued walking and glassing, eventually finding our way to the small

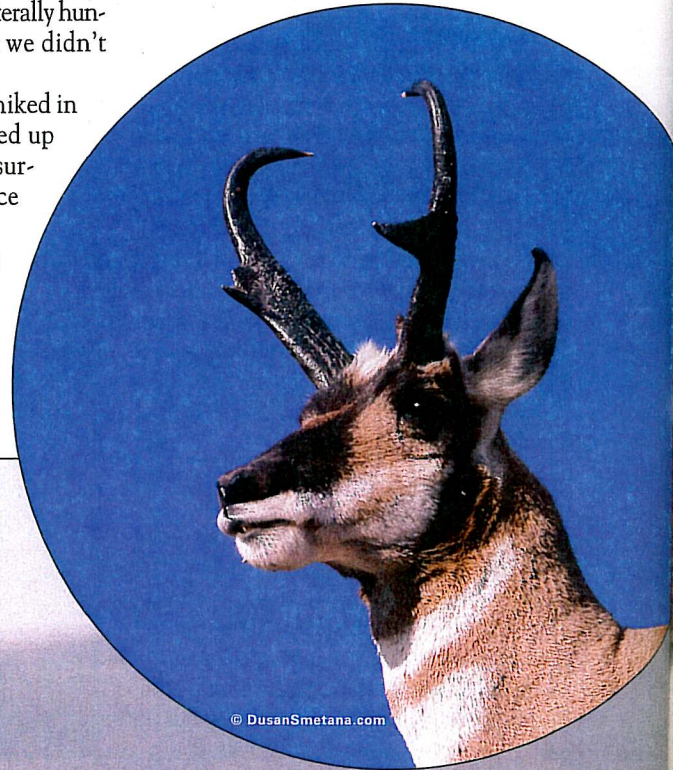
reservoir, its murky water surrounded by wild horses that stampeded away at the sight of us, raising a cloud of dust that must have been visible for miles. After walking around the edge of the water hole and finding nothing but horse tracks, we hid ourselves in an elevated position on the side of a nearby butte. The remainder of the day was spent glassing the surrounding area and keeping surveillance on the reservoir, but while literally hundreds of horses came and went we didn't see a single pronghorn.

The second morning we hiked in via a different route and climbed up onto a large butte to glass the surrounding country. In the distance

we spotted the gray-legged buck standing on a ridge within a few hundred yards of where we had seen him the day before. As soon as I focused the spotting scope on him I could see he was looking right at us and a moment later he raced away running like only a pronghorn can. From our elevated position I could follow the small dust plume he was kicking up as he ran across the prehistoric landscape finally disappearing, without pause, over the horizon miles away. We spent the rest of the day hiking into new parts of the area and saw another buck with two does that acted as if they had never seen people before. Unfortunately, the buck didn't have the quality of horns that we were looking for so we walked away leaving them calmly staring at us.

It's not unusual to see bucks with prongs or horn tips broken off, so care should be taken to make sure that the trophy you're looking at has two complete horns.

The ear length may vary by region or from animal to animal, but on an average mature buck, the ear should measure about six inches from the center of its base to its tip.



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FIELD JUDGING

It was on the second evening that we discovered that the rough ride driving in must have worn a small hole in the bottom of our water jug. While we had been out hunting, all of our water had slowly soaked into the parched desert soil. That left us with two six-packs of Diet Pepsi and the water from the rapidly melting ice in our coolers, which tasted like old plastic.

On the third day, we again spotted the gray-legged buck within a few hundred yards of the place we had seen him the previous mornings. This time he was unaware of us and we slowly eased back out of sight, then hurried up the bottom of a ravine that would put us less than 200 yards from him. Everything was going fine and we were almost to our chosen landmark when the wind shifted, carrying our scent in the buck's direction. I quickly scrambled up the side of the ravine and peeked over the edge, but the gray-legged buck was gone. I clawed my way over the edge and sprinted to the top of the ridge the buck had been standing on just moments before, but all I saw was his signature dust plume as he went over the horizon in the distance.

Judging from the last two days experience, we knew we wouldn't see him again for the rest of the day, so we decided to walk back to our truck, drive over, and check out another area in the afternoon. While walking through a draw below the ridge where we had seen the buck each morning, we discovered why we always saw him near this place. Hidden in the bottom of the grease-wood-choked coulee was a depression no more than ten yards across that was full of a wet dark gray muck the consistency of wet cement. Out in the middle of this muck, water oozed to the top forming a thin shimmering pool. From the tracks, the big buck pronghorn risked being bogged down to slog his way out to the middle of the muck for a drink of water and I assumed that the risk of being bogged down was what kept the horses away from his seep. Now we had him, or so I thought.

In the predawn darkness of the fourth day, I made my way to the downwind side of the big buck's lair and sat shivering in

the cold desert wind, waiting for the sun to come up. As the morning brightened, I saw sage grouse, jackrabbits and coyotes, but no pronghorn and by mid-morning I was a little discouraged that my planned ambush hadn't worked. I climbed a nearby butte and glassed the surrounding area

for several hours but the buck was nowhere in sight. As I hiked back to the truck where Chad was waiting I wondered if I had spooked the buck while walking in the darkness that morning or if I had driven him out of the area when he scented me at close range the day before.

Day five found us easing into glassing position just as it was getting light enough to see. After several hours of glassing without a glimpse of a pronghorn, I was ready to pack up and move to another area, if only to see whether I remembered what pronghorn looked like. This was our final day of hunting and we were heading home that afternoon. We hiked back to the truck, loaded our gear and began the bumpy drive back toward civilization. As we got closer to the paved roads, we began to see quite a few pronghorn and we looked over more than 50 bucks that had horns in the 13-inch or over class, but none of them compared to the gray-legged buck.

We eventually arrived at the first little town and stopped to fuel up. While I was waiting for the tank to fill, I looked across the street and saw a neon vacancy sign on the front of a little motel. That's when a light went on in my brain and I realized that sleeping in the truck, not being able to wash up, eating cold sandwiches and drinking awful tasting water for the last few days may have clouded my judgment. I realized I would probably never see another pronghorn like the gray-legged buck and I knew I had to give it one more try. So I finished fueling the truck, got us a motel room, bought a hot meal, and called home to tell them we would be a day late.

The alarm clock went off at 4:00 a.m. and a light drizzle greeted us as we loaded the truck. It didn't take much moisture to turn the dust into a greasy film on the roads. I was forced to drive much slower than I had planned, which meant we might not make it back to the gray-legged buck's lair before daylight. We were doing okay until we had a flat tire, which we changed in record time in the dark. It was just starting to get light when we had our second flat tire. Fortunately, we had brought a second

spare. Due to the slick road, the high lift jack slid out from under the truck just as I removed the flat tire. No one was hurt but it did take us awhile to get the jack into a stable position so we could lift the axle up out of the mud and slip the spare tire on while the jack teetered and threatened to slide out again. Finally we were on our way once more, without another spare tire, heading into an area where we hadn't seen another person all week.

At about 10:00 a.m. we turned onto the last two-track road that dead-ended near the gray-legged buck's lair, and I was horrified to see fresh vehicle tracks going in and coming back out on "our" road. I figured it was probably only sage grouse hunters, but due to the gray-legged buck's psychotic wariness, I knew he would vacate the area if he had seen, heard, or smelled anyone.

We parked at the end of the road and after gathering my fanny pack, rifle and binoculars, I eased the door on my truck closed and quietly motioned for Chad to follow me. We quickly made our way to our favored vantage point, always being careful to stay in the low areas where we couldn't be seen if the buck was there.

As I carefully peeked over the top of the hill, my heart nearly jumped out of my chest, as I saw the gray-legged buck standing on his ridge. I carefully eased back out of sight and instructed Chad to stay where he was and out of sight for 30 minutes, then he was to stand up in full view of the buck and walk toward him. I hurried into the bottom of a draw that would hide me from view and quickly proceeded to work my way around to the far side of the buck, always staying out of his sight. Miraculously the wind cooperated and I was able to station myself along his previous escape route. I had only been in position for a few minutes, when the gray-legged buck streaked through a pass in the hills quartering toward me. I found him in my scope as he was running past, but before I could estimate the lead for the shot, he did something totally out of character, he stopped and looked back, and that is where he fell. I don't remember hearing my gun go off, but I remember seeing him drop without a quiver. I remember how he just kept getting bigger as I walked over to him on shaking legs and I remember the tape measure passing the 17-inch mark as Chad and I measured his horns. Thanks to Bill Jordan, Chad, and a hearty helping of luck, I had taken a pronghorn that would score high enough to qualify for the Boone and Crockett Club's all-time records book.



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Horns with very little curve are commonly overestimated and horns with a lot of curve are underestimated.

Field Judging Pronghorn

When assessing a pronghorn in the field, you should be concerned with three main features – the length of the horns, the length of the prongs, and the circumference of the horns.

The Length of the Horns

To estimate the length of the horns, we can use two features on the head of the pronghorn. First is the length of the ear. This length may vary by region or from animal to animal, but on an average mature buck, the ear should measure about six inches from the center of its base to its tip. The second feature is the distance from the front edge of the horn to the end of the nose. This distance will average eight inches. Using the ear for example, if a buck has an ear's length of horn below the lower edge of the prong, and the prong has good depth, say half-an-ear or three inches, then with an ear's length of horn above the prong, the pronghorn's total horn length should measure about 15 inches. For most people, the horn length above the prong is the hardest to estimate due to the degree of curvature and direction in which the horn tip points. Above the prong, the horns may curve forward, backward, or in, or a combination of the three, or they may not curve at all. The tips of the horns may ultimately end up pointing anywhere from straight up to 180 degrees straight down. The most common shape is for each horn to curve in and back to some degree with the tips pointing at a 90° to 180° angle in relation to the rest of the horn. This requires a broadside, front or rear and quartering view to accurately estimate the length of the curve. Pronghorn horns with very little curve are commonly overestimated and horns with a lot curve are underestimated. The rea-

As a quick reference, a prong that actually protrudes three inches or more from the front of the horn is very good.

son for this is that we are initially inclined to look at the height of the horn from the animal's head to the top of the horn, rather than the length of the horn around the curve to its tip. This is why at first glance, horns with little or no curve tend to look much longer than horns that have a lot of curve, but are of equal or greater length. It should also be noted that initially massive horns tend to appear to be much shorter in length than they really are, while slender horns tend to appear to be longer in length than they really are.

The Length of the Prongs

This measurement is taken from the tip of the prong along its upper edge on the outer side of the horn to the horn proper, continuing at a right angle to the horn's axis to the back edge of the horn. Measured in this way, most records-book pronghorn entries have prongs measuring over five inches and they may reach lengths of eight inches or more. As a quick reference, a prong that actually protrudes three inches or more from the front of the horn is very good. The length of the prongs can be estimated by comparing them to the average eight-inch distance from the front edge of the horn to the end of the nose. This is also a good time to point out that bucks are rambunctious fighters and it's not unusual to see bucks with prongs or horn tips broken off, so care should be taken to make sure that the trophy you're looking at has two complete horns.

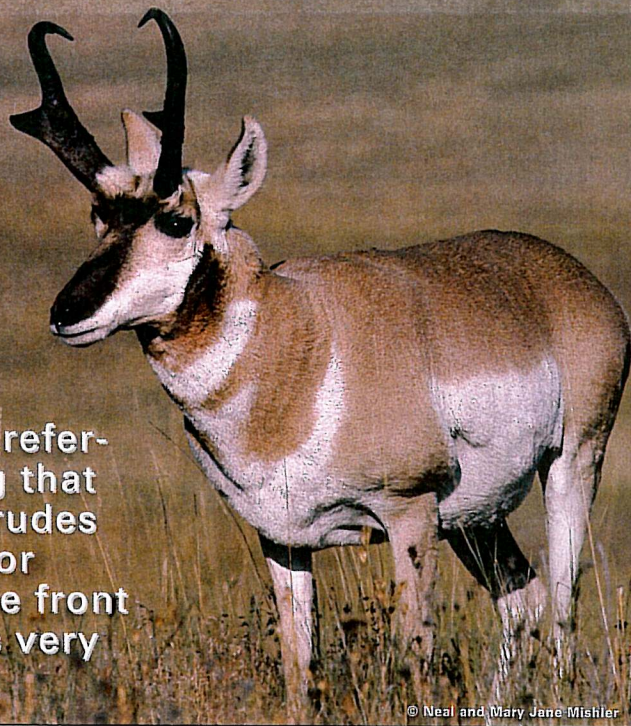
The Circumference of the Horns

There are four circumference measurements taken on each horn. These are taken at

the base and at the first, second, and third quarters with locations determined by dividing the longer horn's length measurement by four. The circumference measurements of the horn can be estimated by using the animal's four-inch eye circumference as a reference. This works easiest above the prong where the horns are usually round. Estimating the circumference of the horn from the base up to the prong can be tricky because some horns are quite flat and thin giving them the appearance of being much heavier than they really are when viewed from the side. Again, to accurately estimate circumference requires a broadside, front or rear and quartering view. If the bases appear wide from the side and fairly thick from the front or back, they should score well in circumference points.

The spread of the horns is not a scoring consideration and has no effect on the final score. There is a rule however that says, "In order to be eligible for entry, both horns, when viewed from the front, should angle upward approximately 15 degrees or more from a horizontal plane projected across both horn bases. This eliminates heads with horns that project straight out or downward from inclusion in the records."

Obviously, estimating the horn dimensions on a pronghorn is truly a top-quality optics game, especially when you consider that there are not many inches separating a good buck from a records-book buck. Couple this with a variety of horn curvatures to consider and a good chance that you will be viewing the animal at long range with heat mirage and wind vibrations to contend with, and you can see that this is not the place to skimp on quality optics. ■



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