

# THE ALL-AMERICAN PRONGHORN

Part goat, part antelope,  
this uniquely American

animal offers

one of

the

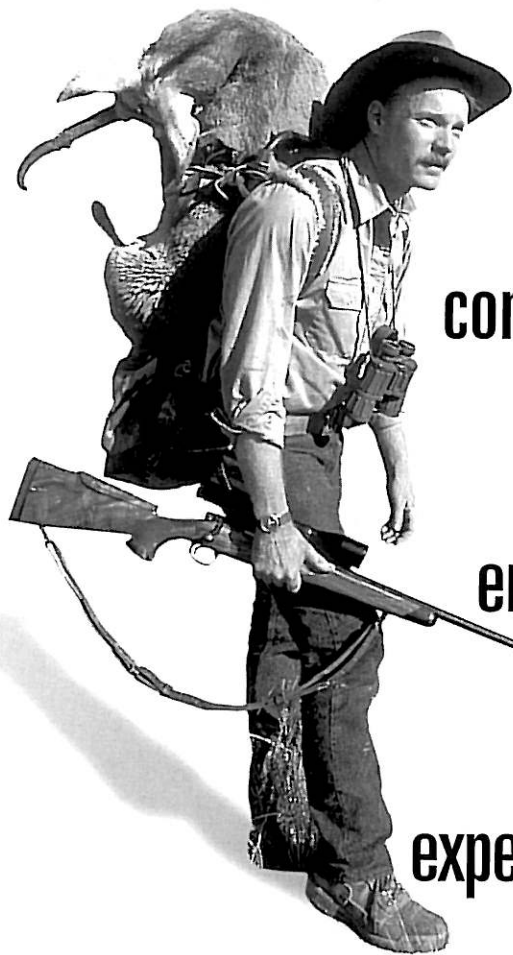
continent's

most

enjoyable

hunting

experiences!



## **It's late November**

now and the fall is on the wane. A couple of late-season whitetail tags remain, but the season is pretty much gone. It's been a good year, overall. Some good winter predator calling, a fine spring bear hunt. The summer doldrums were broken by an African hunt, and the fall schedule was a nice mix of country and game. Lord knows I can't complain—and yet something was missing. 1995 has been one of very few years in the last 30 that I didn't hunt the pronghorn antelope, still one of my favorite animals and most enjoyable hunts.

Part of it is the fact that the pronghorn was my very first big game animal. Most of us, I suspect, started with deer. But when I was growing up my home state of Kansas hadn't yet held her first modern hunting season. In those days Kansans were bird hunters, and those few who hunted big game simply had to travel out of state. A friend of Dad's, Jack Pohl of Bishop's gunstocks in Warsaw, Missouri, hunted pronghorns in Wyoming every fall. Dad was a keen bird hunter and one of the finest wingshots I ever knew, but he never hunted big game. Pohl had taken both of us under his wing, teaching us about rifles and teaching me how to handload. Our final exam was to be a pronghorn hunt in Wyoming.

Just days before the long-awaited trip Jack fell off his horse and broke his ankle badly. His son,

Henry, stood in, and together we drove up to Gillette—with no place to hunt and no idea where to start looking. Dad stopped in at the Gillette Chamber of Commerce. They recommended a full gas tank and some sandwiches, and suggested making a long circle through our hunting unit, stopping at every ranch until we found someone who would give us access. That was the day before the season, and of course we saw pronghorns everywhere. Pop wasn't a big game hunter, but he'd been a fighter pilot—I was then and still am in awe of the eye he had for game.

We stopped at a half-dozen ranches. Even 30 years ago finding a place wasn't a sure thing. Some ranchers had hunters and some wanted too much money. But finally a weathered rancher named Lester Wright took us in. The next day the dream of a first hunt became a reality.

Times have changed. The exact spot where I shot my first antelope became the boom town of Wright, Wyoming. Then the boom went bust and the town mostly went away. The pronghorn are still there, of course. That's one of the things I like about them; they're easily the most accessible and most democratic of our western big game. They may not be quite as readily hunted as whitetails in most of the U.S., and they certainly aren't as numerous as mule deer or elk—but our pronghorn remains an animal that,

# SHORN



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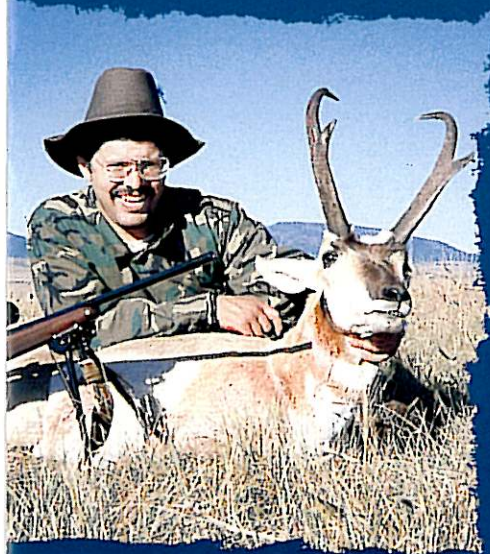


PHOTO BY TOM J. ULRICH

provided you have the foresight to apply for a tag, you can still simply go hunt and have high likelihood for success.

Even 30 years ago we were probably unwise to drive several hundred miles without a place to hunt—especially in a hunting unit that's mostly private land. Today, though, I suspect a hunter in a similar fix could still knock on enough doors in Wyoming or eastern Montana and find a spot. Much simpler and more sure would be to plan a hunt somewhere on the millions of acres of public land that checkerboard pronghorn country. Either way, it would make a lot of sense to plan a couple of days' scouting prior to the season opening.

The other obvious option is a guided hunt. As with most hunting, guided hunts tend to be more successful than do-it-yourself, and the chances for a large trophy are also somewhat better. After all, part of the cost is in coming to an area that's pre-scouted, with the outfitter betting his reputation on your success. Having said that, unlike much of our more exotic western species, a guide really isn't necessary for pronghorn. Provided you have a bit more time to spare and can get a hunting vehicle into pronghorn country. If you're short on time or it's just too far to drive, then an outfitted hunt makes the most sense. The good news, again, is that pronghorn hunts are relatively simple to outfit and thus the costs—even for the best guided hunts—are comparatively low.

Excepting extra doe permits in some units, virtually all pronghorn permits are on a drawing today. The primary exceptions are landowner tags, available in New Mexico, Texas, and perhaps a couple of other spots. These landowner tags can be costly since they're a sure thing. Otherwise it's a take-your-chances lottery, with

TOP INSET: PRONGHORN HUNTING IS MOSTLY A GAME OF CAREFUL GLASSING. THE ANIMALS THEMSELVES ARE QUITE VISIBLE, BUT JUDGING TROPHY QUALITY AND READING THE TERRAIN WELL ENOUGH TO PLAN A STALK ARE THE REAL SECRETS TO SUCCESS.

MIDDLE INSET: PAUL SPENARD, THEN OF REMINGTON ARMS, TOOK THIS EXCEPTIONAL PRONGHORN IN NEW MEXICO. A PORTALBE REST LIKE THE HARRIS BIPOD IS AN OUTSTANDING TOOL FOR THIS KIND OF HUNTING.

permits applied for in the late winter and spring. How tough the permits are to draw is generally a pure reflection of hunting pressure, trophy quality, or both. California, for instance, offers relatively few permits, residents only. The trophy quality is fabulous, but it can take a lifetime to draw. Arizona has easily the best pronghorns in North America, but permit numbers are low and the tags almost impossible to draw. Wyoming has far and away the most permits—but some units are almost “sure things” and others are very tough. The Red Desert region, for instance, is known as a great trophy-producing area—but permits are very hard to come by. Off on the east side, where I’ve done most of my hunting over the years, the country is mostly public land and the trophy quality is thought to be average. Drawing is usually easy.

The most overlooked pronghorn country is probably eastern Montana. There are loads of pronghorns and trophy quality is surprisingly good—but hunting pressure is low and chances for drawing very, very good. Colorado has limited numbers of pronghorns, but hunter interest is fairly low and the tags aren’t all that hard to come by. Colorado also offers preference points, which makes drawing a tag eventually a sure thing.

Given a tag and a few

days to hunt, a pronghorn hunt should be successful unless you’re inordinately picky. I rarely am with pronghorns simply because I love to eat them as much as I like to hunt them. All my life I’ve had friends turn up their noses at pronghorns. Much as I hate to admit it, I have to concede that those first pronghorns Dad and Henry Pohl and I shot were darn near inedible. I don’t know exactly why, but I have some theories. Since I learned better, I’ve skinned my pronghorns as quickly as possible, taking care to keep the hair off the meat and cooling them down as rapidly as I can. I also always bone the meat on the unproven theory that the bone marrow gives the strong taste. Handled quickly and properly, I’d rather have pronghorn than any other meat I know of. No, it isn’t like eating a sagebrush!

The other thing about trophy hunting for pronghorns is that few areas hold surprises. If you want big pronghorns, you need to be in an area that produces them. This is true with virtually every animal, but I find it especially true with pronghorns. In most areas the bucks are of a type; you can find one an inch or even

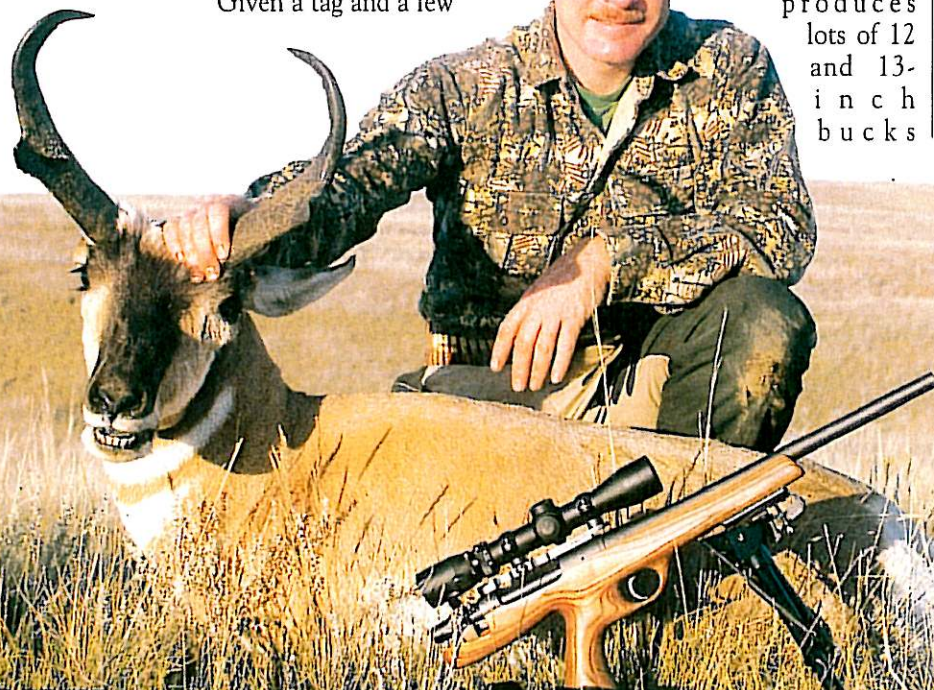
two larger than the average if you look very hard—but in the typical pronghorn area that produces lots of 12 and 13-inch bucks



you are very unlikely to find a 17-inch. Truth is most areas are managed too intensively to produce huge bucks—and in many areas pronghorn longevity is limited by bad winters.

For big pronghorns you need to look to areas with mild winters and limited permits. Northern Arizona and well-managed ranches in New Mexico are good bets. But, perhaps surprisingly, some of the highest percentages of very large pronghorns come out of eastern Oregon, northern California, and Nevada—all tough draw areas—and west Texas. Among areas that are accessible (meaning easy to draw) eastern Montana would be my top choice. Hunting pressure

THE AUTHOR TOOK THIS BUCK AT VERY CLOSE RANGE WITH AN XP-100 IN 7MM-08 REMINGTON. WITH GOOD STALKING PRONGHORNS CAN BE HUNTED VERY EFFECTIVELY WITH HANDGUNS AND MUZZLELOADERS. CLOSING TO ARCHERY RANGE IS A GREAT DEAL MORE DIFFICULT.





is light and the winters are generally surprisingly mild. However, one should be mindful that Wyoming has the highest number of permits, the highest number of pronghorns, and consistently produces the largest number of Boone and Crockett heads. In terms of percentages the odds aren't high—but Wyoming does produce her share of monsters.

Generally speaking, after a day or so of scouting with good optics you should know what your area has to offer. If you're lucky enough to hit pronghorn country after a series of mild winters—two or three can make a big difference—then even so-so country can produce surprises.

Back in the '70's, after I got back from a year overseas with the Marines, Dad and I put in for pronghorn tags at Wright, Wyoming. We got there a day or so before the season and scouted around. That's the kind of country that usually produces lots of 13-inchers, but rarely better—under normal circumstances. While scouting Dad and I saw several nice bucks, but what I was seeing simply didn't register like it should have.

I spotted a very good buck with long prongs and horns that hooked sharply backwards—dis-

tinctive as well as nice. He was alongside a waterhole about two in the afternoon, and I decided he'd do just fine if I could find him in the morning. Of course he was there, in some hilly country about a half-mile from his water. He and his does drifted over about three hills, and I drifted with them, keeping low and closing the distance. I don't think it was yet eight a.m. when I shot him. He was as good as I'd thought, about 15 1/2 inches.

Through the day we saw a couple more good bucks that we couldn't get onto, but toward midafternoon a heavy-horned buck charged up out of a draw and insisted on filling Dad's tag. This one was actually a better buck than mine—a half-inch shorter but much heavier all over. Both bucks measured over 80, certainly no mistakes. But with our tags filled, while we cruised around looking for prairie dog towns, we saw two or three bucks that were clearly bigger. There had been several mild winters, but I didn't appreciate the difference that made until that day. I appreciated it more the next year.

A buddy of mine, Tim Jones, and I came up the following year. He's a serious trophy hunter, so I'd filled him full of tales about the huge bucks we'd seen after we filled out. All they were was tales. The



passing winter had been a hard one and the big bucks were simply gone. Plenty of antelope remained in their place, but all the bucks were of a type—12 inches, maybe 13. We hunted hard for several days and never saw a buck close to 14! I think the older bucks go first in case of a hard winter or serious drought—but I also think a hard winter or very dry spring retards horn growth, just like it does on true antlered game.

Those horns that shed are just one of many unique features our *Antilocapra americana* displays. His Latin name describes him as an antelope-goat, and indeed he has some characteristics of both types of ungulate. However, he is uniquely American and totally unique. His is a genus with just one

TOP: PRONGHORNS ARE USUALLY SHOT AT LONGER THAN AVERAGE RANGES -- BUT TRUE LONG-RANGE SHOOTING IS USUALLY NOT CALLED FOR. PRACTICE SHOOTING FROM PRONE AND SITTING POSITIONS; NATURAL RESTS ARE RARE ON THE OPEN PLAINS.

INSET: DWIGHT VAN BRUNT AND THE AUTHOR WITH VAN BRUNT'S HANDGUN PRONGHORN, A RESPECTABLE AND VERY PRETTY BUCK.



TOP: THE PRONGHORN IS A FINE "FIRST BIG GAME HUNT" FOR YOUNG HUNTERS. THIS COLORADO BUCK WAS ADRIAN FLORES' FIRST TROPHY, AS A WYOMING BUCK WAS FOR THE AUTHOR 30 YEARS AGO.



INSET: THE AUTHOR AND HIS FATHER, BUD BODDINGTON, MADE A NICE DOUBLE ON THESE MONTANA PRONGHORN. MONTANA IS UNDER-RATED AS A PRONGHORN STATE, WITH GOOD QUALITY AND AN EASY TAG DRAW.

species, and he has no close relatives anywhere in the world. He has coarse, hollow hair that provides superb insulation—hair unlike that of deer, goats, or antelope. He can hear reasonably well and probably has a decent sense of smell, but his first line of defense are his legendary eyes. Those orbs are set well apart, almost bug-eyed. Unlike many animals, you can't really move on a pronghorn when he's facing away or when his head is down feeding. He can almost see in a 360-degree circle, and it appears that his peripheral vision is

as good as the rest. We simply don't know exactly how good those eyes are. I've often heard them compared to a man with 10-power binoculars, but I've read the same about sheep and deer. I tend to believe the pronghorn's vision is the best of all—and however good that is, suffice it to say that you simply cannot move around within sight of them and have any chance of closing within range.

I said a pronghorn's eyes were his first defense. That's not really true. The eyes are the warning system while the legs are really the defense. The pronghorn is built for speed, not only short bursts but staying power. Those spindly-seeming leg bones have the strongest tensile strength in the animal kingdom, and that barrel-

chested body is all lungs. For short bursts the pronghorn is almost as fast as the cheetah—but for the long haul nothing can touch him. When the

eyes give warning he uses the legs—and he's gone from danger in a flash of buff and white, mouth open to suck in oxygen. When I was a kid all I ever saw was running pronghorns—and I supported the ammunition makers quite well trying to hit them. For many years now I've avoided shooting at running pronghorns like the plague. It can be done, but it's to be avoided—especially when they're running in a group. When I was a kid I gave the leading buck what I thought was a perfect lead—and cleanly dropped the doe two ante-

lope behind him!

And yet pronghorn are hardly invulnerable. All too often hunters make the mistake of cruising pronghorn range in vehicles, hoping to stumble onto one. That works. Worse yet, would-be hunters still chase them with vehicles in some areas. That works, too—but both solutions rob the pronghorn of his dignity as a game animal and cheat the hunter out of a truly fine experience. Stalking pronghorns is, to me, one of the most enjoyable hunts this continent has to offer. It can take time and sweat, and usually plenty of cactus spines—but is it fun!

That dead-flat, treeless country they inhabit usually isn't as dead-flat as it looks. There are usually unseen little gullies and rises that offer cover. If you spot your buck from afar, read the ground well, and take your time it's amazing how close you can get. Sometimes.

Oddly, while pronghorn country may look all the same to you it doesn't to them. Pronghorns are surprisingly habitual in that featureless country. No, they don't use the same trails like whitetail. But if you spot one in a certain area at a certain time of day and you don't spook him unduly, chances are better than even he'll be in the same general area at the same time the next day. Certainly within a mile or less. He'll probably water at the same stock tank or pond at about the same time of day. And when pushed you can follow him for miles—but you'll often follow him along a circular path as he eventually heads back to the starting point.

On several occasions, after a couple of failed stalks, I've given up on a particular buck late in the afternoon and found him the next morning close to where he was the

first time I stalked him. And yet I don't think they move a great deal at night. If you find a buck towards last light and you don't think there's time remaining for a good stalk, you're almost better to leave him. Chances are good he'll be right there the next morning.

Last year I wanted to get a pronghorn for a young friend of mine, Adrian Flores. At 18 he'd been hunting for several seasons but had been having terrible luck with deer and elk. I thought maybe pronghorn would change his luck, and I did everything I could to stack the deck. An outfitter friend of mine let me use part of his lease near Limon, Colorado, and we got tags for the right area. The problem was that, after a couple of scouting runs, I was pretty sure there was just one good buck in the area we had permission to hunt.

The day before the season Adrian met me in Limon and we went out to do one last scouting run—me hoping a couple of “backup bucks” had moved into the area. None had—and we also couldn't find the big one. I was frantic, because if he wasn't there our options were extremely limited in that private land-locked hunting unit. Just at dark he trooped up out of a little cut along a long ridge—the best place he could possibly be.

The next morning we left the truck well back on the far side of the ridge, hiked along below the skyline, and crawled over the top. As it usually is, the ground was more broken up close than it looked from afar—for long, tense

minutes we couldn't find them. Then I spotted a doe, and when we crawled farther we could see the whole herd.

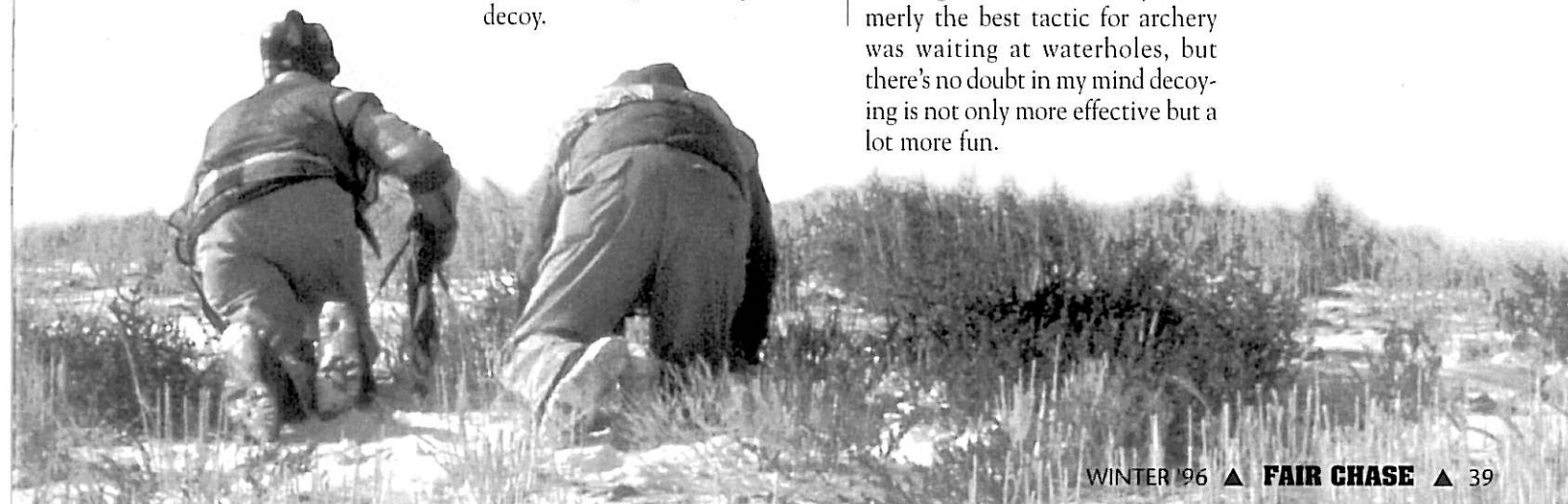
Keeping low, we started down the ridge to close the distance just about the time the pronghorns started up the ridge. We met them head-on at a bit over 100 yards, and they almost caught us with our pants down. We had just time to get flat and get set up for a shot when the herd came into view, and Adrian took his first pronghorn very nicely with an easy shot well-executed. Me, well, I knew that was the only good buck in the pasture at that particular time. So I did the sensible thing and shot the next young buck I saw. Sure was tasty!

I know that the does saw us on that occasion—but rather than spook they took a few steps forward for a closer look . . . and the buck followed suit, which was his undoing. This is not uncommon if you keep low, are perfectly still, and don't have anything unnatural such as glare from optics or a shiny riflestock. Pronghorn, I must admit, are not the brightest creatures on the planet. I think, as is the case with most animals, even their fabulous eyes key primarily on movement. And they have a healthy curiosity. The old timers used to “toll them in” by laying flat and raising a stick with a white flag. At a distance what we see of a pronghorn is a flash of white, and I expect that's also what they see, especially at long range. One might theorize that the pronghorn's reaction to a white flag isn't curiosity at all, but a response to a primitive decoy.

## The old timers used to “toll them in” by laying flat and raising a stick with a white flag.

Whether that's true or not, decoying works. Boy, does it work! I do not recommend it for gun hunters, especially on public land. Hiding behind a pronghorn dummy just plain ain't smart! But for archers and hunters in unusually controlled situations it's extremely interesting to watch pronghorns react. I was up on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana with Dwight Van Brunt of Burris and Outdoor Life's Joe Healey. It was late in the season and we were the only permit holders in the field, so we tried a decoy largely out of curiosity. Joe and our guide, Reno Shambo, pushed it ahead of them while stalking a nice buck. As soon as they came into view his reaction was instantaneous and startling—he darn near charged them! This decoy was a life-size image of a small buck. The rut was on and it was clear the large buck thought a youngster was horning in on his territory. Formerly the best tactic for archery was waiting at waterholes, but there's no doubt in my mind decoying is not only more effective but a lot more fun.

BELOW: MOST PRONGHORN COUNTRY ISN'T AS FLAT AS IT LOOKS; THERE ARE USUALLY SUBTLE RISES AND LOW GULLIES THAT OFFER COVER FOR STALKING.



# As soon as they came into view his reaction was instantaneous and startling -- he darn near charged them!

BELOW: IT'S SIMPLY AMAZING WHAT DECOYS CAN DO -- BUT UNLESS YOU HAVE TOTAL CONTROL OVER YOUR HUNTING AREA THIS IS NOT A TECHNIQUE RECOMMENDED FOR FIREARMS HUNTERS.

INSET: THIS AVERAGE-SIZED BUCK WAS TAKEN WITH A .270 WINCHESTER, A CLASSIC CHOICE FOR PRONGHORN. THIS BUCK HAS EXTREMELY LONG HOOKS -- A FEATURE THAT'S HARD TO JUDGE, BUT ADDS A GREAT DEAL OF LENGTH.

Depending on exactly where you are pronghorn generally rut late in September or very early in October. Most seasons are relatively short and specific, so you can't always pick the rut. While mating the bucks are more goofy than usual, which is good news—but the bad news is that they're almost constantly with a fairly large harem, which means there are a lot of eyes out there while you're stalking. Because of this, I don't think the exact time of season is really important. In hard-hunted areas with short seasons, opening day is important. Actually, the couple of days prior is probably even more important. Half the hunt, especially if you're seeking a trophy buck, is finding one and figuring out where he lives and

how to waylay him. This is best done before hunting pressure shifts things around.

In areas with longer seasons, say 10 days or more, the end of the season can actually be as good as the opener. Most pronghorn pressure occurs on opening day, and the animals can get pretty stirred up. The pressure curve drops swiftly, and after a few days things settle back to normal. But do be aware that pronghorns drop their horns quite early.

The horns—cognified epithelium, like finger nails, with some hair enclosed, especially at the base—grow up around a bony core. Unique in the animal kingdom, they're shed annually with the shedding usually taking place in mid-November. New growth starts very soon after and continues through the winter and spring. Eastern Montana is one of the places with a long pronghorn season. It starts early in October, before deer season, then continues on through much of the deer season, making a combo hunt possible. By the end of the season, usually mid-November, a great percentage of the bucks have lost their horns, making for slim pickings. One year, very late in the season, Jack Atcheson Jr. and I glassed a massive group of pronghorns 'way out on a sagebrush flat. This, too, is typical of pronghorns—after mating season and as winter approaches they congregate into

huge herds, almost certainly so they can collectively stamp through the snow to feed.

There were just a few bucks in the herd—easily 100 animals—that still had horns, and one was clearly outstanding. There was just one way to get close enough, and that was to crawl—a long, long distance. After an eternity of getting cactus spines in our knees, hands, and elbows we closed the range to long shooting distance. Jack led the way to a particularly tall sagebrush clump and we set up the spotting scope so we could be sure we had the right buck. Right there, while we watched, he dropped his head to feed and came up with just one horn! After all that crawling I was happy to settle for second best, a nice buck—but nothing like the one that got away!

Pronghorn hunting is mostly a game for good optics, good stalking, and plenty of patience. The optics are absolutely essential, for its critical that pronghorn first be spotted as far away as possible. And also judged for quality if that's important to you. Pronghorns are quite difficult to judge, and at first they all look bigger than they are. The ears are about six inches from butt to tip, which is a



good indicator. What's hard to see is how much the horns curl in or back at the tip. A pronghorn that doubles the ears is a 12-inch buck—but the tips can add three inches or more if they hook sharply and well. Good binoculars backed up with a spotting scope are really essential. Once a decision is reached, good stalking and patience take over.

In my experience it's a myth that pronghorns must be taken at long range. Without a doubt ranges average longer than with most big game animals—but I have never taken a pronghorn as far away as 400 yards, and very few over 300. On that same Fort Belknap hunt—where you can purchase two tags—I decided to take my second buck with Dwight's XP-100 pistol in 7mm-08. I shot it and figured I was good to 200 yards, hoping for half that. Reno Shambo and I followed a buck into some broken ground where a plateau fell off into ravine-cut badlands. The buck decided to come up the same ridge we were coming down, and we had a meeting engagement at point-blank range. At about 30 yards all I could see through the handgun scope was hair, fortunately the right hair in the right spot.

I expect the average shot is somewhere on the near side of 200 yards. This means ultra-long-range rigs really aren't essential. However, accuracy is important because the pronghorn presents a relatively small target. A flat-shooting rifle is important, too, because range is very difficult to judge in that open country. Best to have a rifle that shoots

flat enough so you can hold in the center of the chest at moderate ranges and high on the shoulder if he looks kinda small. Magnum power is not needed, but a pronghorn's stamina shouldn't be under-rated. Hit well, no problem—but hit poorly a pronghorn can lead you on a very long day.

If you're a good and patient stalker and the country is relatively broken a .243 or 6mm are just fine—but if you need to take shots beyond 250 yards or so you're pushing the energy envelope. To my mind, the perfect pronghorn caliber is the .25-06, with the good old .270 Winchester an equally sound second choice. Of course, any flat-shooting deer caliber will do just fine, and there's nothing wrong with the small belted cartridges like the .240, .257, and .270 Weatherby and

the .264 Winchester Magnum.

The wind-swept sagebrush hills and open prairies the pronghorn calls home are uniquely beautiful in their way—and the pronghorn is one of the most strikingly handsome animals in the world. Especially in terms of sheer enjoyment, hunting him is also one of the most underrated pastimes in the hunting world. I really missed crawling through the cactus after him this year, and that's a mistake I hope I don't repeat soon!

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FORT BELKNAP GUIDE, RENO SHAMBO, JOE HEALEY, AND DWIGHT VAN BRUNT WITH HEALEY'S PRONGHORN TAKEN BY USING A DECOY. IT WORKED LIKE A CHARM; HEALEY'S BUCK DARN NEAR RAN OVER THE HUNTERS!

