

# SOUTH DAKOTA PRAIRIE KING

BEYOND THE SCORE

Keenan M. Soyland

Photos Courtesy of Author

**The 2016 fall archery pronghorn season started for us during the previous spring turkey season with scouting notations. Locations of animals and herd bucks were documented as we covered lots of ground in our hunting unit. Pronghorn numbers in our state had increased in recent years due to mild winters, and we were excited about some of the animals we put in our spotting scopes.**

After spending the summer months anticipating the archery pronghorn season in our home state of South Dakota—we made calls to gain permission on tracts of private ground and put in many hours fine-tuning our shooting skills—opening day, September 2, was upon us. Our first opportunity to make the 350-mile trek to pronghorn country was in the works. My hunting partner/father has hunted pronghorn for over 40 years with firearm and archery equipment, so his experience was a valuable tool in determining our hunting approach.

Near the end of the first day, after covering a lot of ground in search of a trophy animal, we had the spotting scope on what we knew was a true South Dakota trophy. A very dominant buck in his prime with a herd of nearly 20 does. We hunted that buck hard for four days and made several stalks—getting close a couple times, but things just would not come together. If you have ever archery hunted pronghorn in a spot-and-stalk fashion, you

are well aware the odds are stacked heavily against you. The often flat terrain and keen eyes of pronghorn among many other factors—including the vast amount of territory the animals can cover—can overwhelm any hunter. Not to mention high temps, wind, cactus and an occasional rattlesnake.

During the stalk attempts, we were always careful to avoid alarming the herd or buck if the stalk was not working out. We did not want the trophy to feel the pressure and move from the territory we were able to access. We dealt with all the keen eyes, ears and noses of the large harem the king had gathered. For many reasons, each stalk failed; sometimes we narrowly missed a chance to take a shot. The last two days of the trip ended with the wind blowing up to 30 mph, which made the chance of any shot very risky.

That trip ended with long-range pictures and dreams of a chance at a records-book buck. Early in the season the herd bucks had started gathering their harems, but the window of rut activity had not yet kicked in.

Two weeks later another opportunity for a two-day hunt came about, and with very little question we were back on our way to see if we could once again find the king. We had added another trusted hunter to our group and once again made the trek west. When we returned the rut had definitely taken over as herd bucks had their harems

rounded up and were standing guard to fend off any intruders. We actually witnessed bucks chasing smaller satellite bucks away from the herds—just what we hoped and expected to see with the peak rut dates here. Herd bucks will commonly chase another buck several hundred yards away before returning to their herd after chasing the buck away. If it is another dominant buck, a furious head-to-head battle can take place with the champion earning the right to the herd.

We worried about even finding the buck ever again, but after searching the area and putting the binoculars on a distant herd, there he was! Only eight does were with and he wasn't too far from a small drainage. The window of opportunity was mine. I grabbed what I needed, took some advice from my dad and headed up the creek bed with no time to waste. Paying attention to the lay of the land, the wind and the feeding animals, I was able to sneak up quietly, crawling to within 150 yards of where they fed.

After many failed sneaks in the past with this buck, today seemed different, and time went fast. As I looked through the sagebrush, my heart started pounding when I saw the buck unalarmed with his small herd. The advantage we had on this day was the fact that the rut was in high gear and our long-tested method of using a pronghorn buck decoy was about to be put into motion. Realizing my father was watching the

stalk unfold in his spotting scope from a half mile away, I readied an arrow and then raised the decoy and pushed its stake into the hard prairie to see if I could entice the buck into a showdown.

Little did I realize how he would react! As soon as I put the decoy up and looked around the edge for a reaction the dominant king took one look and went into an immediate head down charge toward me. Wow! With the animal just over 150 yards away and on a dead sprint, I made a decision to pull my bow right away and wait behind the decoy for him to arrive and then see what the distance would be. As my father watched in the spotting scope, he later recalled that the instant the decoy went up, he watched an immediate charge and said to himself, "You better get ready, son—he's coming in to kick your #\$."

There was one small depression just 30 yards in front of me and I briefly saw the tips of the buck's horns at 40 yards still coming fast. Unbelievably the buck came around the decoy in short order and stopped dead in his tracks the moment he noticed the decoy with me at full draw behind it. He was only 25 yards away quartering toward me. It seemed like the whole scenario played out in just seconds and I knew I would use my closest sight pin.

As I let the arrow fly I instantly heard the wallop and saw the red flash right near the tail end of the ribcage with the pronghorn slightly

**This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.**

quartered toward me. It was a magnificent sight to have such a dominant, majestic buck within feet of where I hunched behind my decoy. My heart jumped as I realized I just arrowed the largest buck I had ever decoyed, and it appeared to be a lethal hit.

It was almost surreal as the buck went 75 yards and stood motionless with his head down. Shortly after that he lay down, and even though I felt very good about the shot placement, I waited and tried to control my emotions until the binoculars told us he was lying on his side. As many hunters know, it is very tough to describe the excitement, thrill, and satisfaction of taking a trophy animal when the odds are stacked against you and the adrenalin of that moment overtakes you!



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Keenan celebrated with his father Bill. His pronghorn, scoring 80-2/8 points was taken in Perkins County, South Dakota, in 2016.

When my hunting partner, Carl Johnson, and my father Bill and I walked up on the buck, there was sheer celebration for several minutes. An admiration of a downed majestic trophy and the thanks and respect to the landowner who allowed us to do what we love to do. We felt blessed to have shared the hunt and the entire experience together. As I held the animal's horns in various positions to record photos of the thrilling moment, I was still shaking from the excitement. We were trying to soak up every second of a rare and

exhilarating hunt, one which we will all remember for the rest of our lives. Sharing the thrill with my father and best friend only added to the entire experience.

After making the trip back home and having the buck officially scored, his specs included a 16-7/8 horn length, 6½-inch bases, good prongs and heavy mass all the way to the top. His final score is 80-2/8, which officially makes him a "Booner." He now ranks as the All-time No. 9 pronghorn for archery kills in South Dakota. The memories and challenges of archery hunting and harvesting a Boone and Crockett prairie king will be cherished forever. ■

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