



THE PRAIRIE, THE BOW, AND THE PRONGHORN

USING A DECOY TO
BOWHUNT PRAIRIE
PRONGHORN IS JUST
PLAIN FUN. HERE'S
HOW I DO IT.

There is one big game animal that is 100 percent unique to the North American continent. He can outrun any critter in terms of endurance and has the eyes of a raptor. You guessed it—it's the American pronghorn or antelope. Before I tell you my hunting story, let's start with some science, which is always a good idea.

The pronghorn's scientific name, *Antilocapra americana*, means American antelope goat, but the deer-like pronghorn is neither antelope nor goat. It is the sole surviving member of an ancient family dating back 20 million years. The pronghorn is the only animal in the world with branched horns (not antlers), and it's the only animal to shed its horns—as if they were antlers. About 40 percent of does also grow small horns, but they are much smaller than their male counterparts, who also possess a small prong on each horn, hence their name. The distinction between the sexes is through the visible black hairs on both cheeks of the bucks, known as the sub-auricular gland.

Like sheep and goats, the pronghorn has a gall bladder. Like giraffes, pronghorns lack dewclaws. If that weren't enough, the pronghorn is the fastest animal in the Western hemisphere, running in 20-foot bounds at up to 60 miles per hour. Unlike the cheetah—speed burner of the African plains—the pronghorn can run for hours at a cruising speed of 35 to 40 mph! They are also called “long-legged cursors” and have evolved to run. They have large eyes with pigmentation, enabling them to cope with the sun's blazing rays in summer and reflections from snow in winter.

Scientists believe 40-50 million pronghorns once lived from southern Saskatchewan to northern Mexico, west to southeastern Oregon, and southwest to Baja California. Market hunting in the 1800s reduced their numbers to as low as 12,000 by 1915. Since then, through several management programs developed by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service biologists in Wyoming and Montana, as

A familiar sight in southern Alberta's prairies: oil rigs, native fescue grasses and the pronghorn.

Read more about the Club's involvement in recovering pronghorn on page 8.



Crawling under barbed wire in the cactus infested prairie takes determination.

well as the Canadian prairie provinces, pronghorns have made a remarkable comeback. Biologists currently estimate their numbers to be around one million.

Southern Alberta represents the northern range of this wonderful plains dweller, and it takes 10-12 years to draw a tag for a buck. The population of pronghorns in Alberta fluctuates with harsh/mild winters and is around 15,000 animals. Roughly five percent of the population is set aside for draws. The mere fact that someone like myself has the privilege to hunt this wonderful and unique prairie animal is only possible thanks to the vision and relentless conservation efforts of pioneers such as Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, and Wilfried Laurier.

HUNTING THE MIGHTY PRONGHORN

Since childhood, my passion for hunting has mostly been centered around a scattergun and a rifle. As I grew older, the silence and stealth of bow hunting started appealing to me. I got my first compound bow in 2009 and practiced at

targets. My goal was to get my first kill on a pronghorn. After drawing a tag that only lasted three weeks, I put things in motion for success. I knew this would not be easy as the game is skittish, the country is open, and the nemesis of the archer (wind) always blows. I also knew I would be shooting from a crouched position off my knees and started shooting my bow that way.

Archery pronghorn hunts are two types. You either set up a blind at a watering hole and wait or use a decoy for a spot-and-stalk approach. I fancy the latter. Looking at what was available for decoys in the retail market convinced me to build my own for several reasons. I wanted a more realistic, three-dimensional look to plant into the ground with a pivoting system in case I had to hunt alone. After all, I am an engineer by trade! This decoy has been responsible for luring and killing at least ten bucks, but that's a story for a different time.

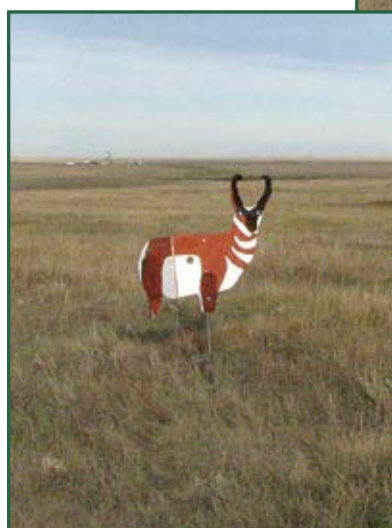
With a fair bit of shooting practice out to 50 yards and a bona fide spirit, I showed up with my buddy

Hank on the opening day in southern Alberta's prairies. My tag was for a tri-zone area, which borders a military base to the east and farmlands to the south. However, I would concentrate on the northern areas where bald prairie, undulating hills, and frequent oil rigs decorate the landscape.

Here's how a pronghorn archery hunt should be orchestrated. You drive around until you spot a herd, which will inevitably have several smaller bucks and one herd buck in early



ABOVE: Alexander demonstrates why hunting pronghorns with a bow is challenging and requires patience. LEFT: His homemade decoy made from pine works like a charm to lure bucks in close.



September. Once that happens, you get out of their sight quickly. Park the truck, grab your bow and formulate a stalk to get close to them. If you can gain elevation, more power to you. You then have your buddy pop the decoy while you both hide behind it for the hunt. You must have an arrow nocked and a rangefinder handy, as things can happen quickly. The herd bucks often do not opt for a fight, grab their ladies, and leave. But that is not always the case. The bucks that check out the decoy are typically subordinate satellite bucks. Remember that pronghorns have excellent eyesight and use it to evade predators. Their sense of smell is not as strong, perhaps because they compensate for it with their vision.

OPENING DAY MADNESS

On opening day, we hunted very hard and stalked until dark. For one reason or another, our stalks were busted. My only chance at a shot came when we were just getting set up to pop the decoy. Before I knew it, a buck was inside the 40-yard circle checking us out. By the time I had stopped fidgeting with my bow and

tried to nock an arrow, the buck had had enough. It loudly snorted, raised the hair on that gorgeous white patch on its rump, and trotted to the adjacent county. Not wearing the proper knee and elbow protection didn't help us, as my body was infested with cactus thorns. On two other stalks where a buck came in, they would stand just outside of my comfortable bow range and stare at the decoy.

Opening day taught me some grand lessons. I let my wounds heal, practiced more, and returned to the prairie with a more determined spirit. I also poked one more hole in my decoy that would allow me to look at a buck while crouched behind the decoy holder.

By this time, the rut had reached its peak, and every single herd had a herd buck either running after the does to round them up or trying to chase off an intruding buck. This was a good thing as it would allow us to get closer to the herd while the buck had its mind set on the chase.

Our stalk on at least three separate herds was futile, with either the herd buck leaving the area with his

harem or one of the does getting fixated on our stalk. I started to feel like we were doing something wrong, but I tried to stay positive and soldier on.

DECOY FOR THE WIN

At noon one day, we drove to a side road, parked the truck, and had lunch. As I often do on my warm weather hunts, I took a siesta after a cold beer and sandwich. The prey is sleeping, so why not the predator? Around three in the afternoon, we had a stiff cup of coffee and continued the search. As I turned the corner on a dirt trail going north, something in the distance caught my attention. We quickly drove behind a knoll and set up the spotting scope.

It was a lone, mature buck grazing and minding its own business. Its horns glittered in the bright prairie sun, and it had that gorgeous orange-white pelage that the pronghorns are known for. This would be ideal as there were no does to watch us. Just in case, we made a big circle to get downwind, crawled under a fence, and popped the decoy. At this point, the buck was 400 yards away. Sure enough, the sight of that

decoy aroused its curiosity and started its slow but deliberate march toward us.

The buck came to exactly 27 yards and stopped. My heart was virtually coming out of my throat from excitement. It was a beauty with perfectly symmetrical horns and good mass. After a short prayer, I gathered my nerves and went to full draw from a kneeling position. The arrow found its target, but I saw it hit a little back. It slowly walked away, jumped a fence, and bedded down 100 yards from us. Its body language showed a liver hit, as all animals generally lie down when shot in the liver. We sat there silently and watched.

After about an hour and a half, another buck appeared out of nowhere and wanted to challenge this poor fellow that had no interest in a sparring match. I rose from my sitting position to show myself, and the buck got the message and left. The buck had weakened by then, and I crawled closer for a finishing shot. This was done with no issues, and I finally had my pronghorn buck. It was a stud with a perfect cape and a great set of horns.

Alberta's prairies are full of cacti and other plants that can poke you. Wear sturdy pants, knee pads and gloves.



Alexander's buddy Gilles behind the driver seat. Notice the addition of a second peep hole on the decoy to spy on the incoming bucks.



IT WAS A LONE, MATURE BUCK GRAZING AND MINDING ITS OWN BUSINESS.

If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in this column, please email Karlie Slayer at Karlie@Boone-Crockett.org.

After a short prayer of gratitude, we took a handful of photographs and gutted the buck. Just as we dragged him to the road, the challenger buck reappeared. This time, we hid behind the decoy, let it come close, and took many close-up photographs and videos. I could hear its breathing rhythm and feel the sense of urgency in its demeanor. What a cool experience for both of us to get into the comfort zone of one of the American prairie's most seclusive and nervous animals.

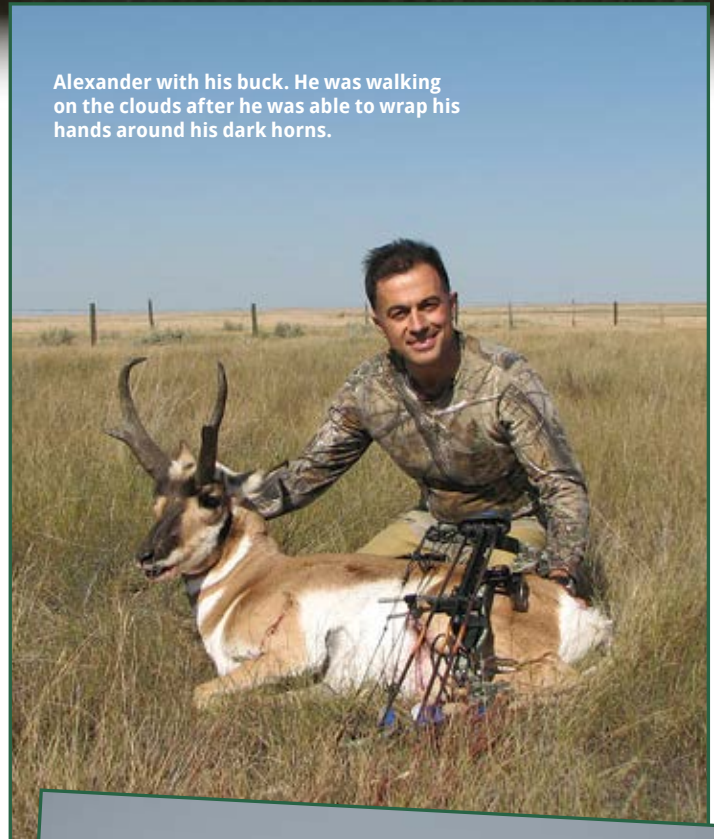
Our three-hour drive back home was filled with joy, laughter, and reminiscing of all the failed and successful

stalks we experienced on that warm September day.

After the 60-day mandatory drying period, I had the buck scored by an official Pope & Young Club measurer. The buck scored 68-4/8 points, earning it inclusion in the P&Y record books. This was absolute gravy to a hunt that was already a memorable experience.

In sum, I thank my buddy Gilles who accompanied me on this hunt, and all the conservation pioneers who helped bring the pronghorn back from near extinction. The American West is a prettier sight with the pronghorn. Don't you agree? ■

Alexander with his buck. He was walking on the clouds after he was able to wrap his hands around his dark horns.



BELOW: The buck Alexander hit was struck in the liver and was bedded down. A challenger buck showed up for a sparring match. **BELOW RIGHT:** This was the challenger buck that we lured in to a close 10-yard distance. They could hear him breathing.

