JUDY WANTULOK

ON MONTANA SAFARI

PURSUING PRONGHORN IS AS CLOSE AS YOU CAN GET TO AN AFRICAN BIG-GAME HUNT WITHOUT FLYING HALFWAY AROUND THE GLOBE.

BY HENRY GOULD

The Great Plains region, which includes much of eastern Montana, has been called "America's Serengeti," a reference to Tanzania's vast grasslands and their abundant and diverse wildlife, including wildebeest, giraffes, and lions. Montana's expansive plains boast their own rich and varied species, such as mule deer, sage grouse, golden eagles, coyotes, and North America's answer to the African gazelle: the pronghorn.

Though commonly called antelope, the pronghorn is a unique species not related to gazelles or any other antelope. In fact, it's not really related to anything. "The pronghorned antelope is found only in North America, and it possesses so many anatomical peculiarities, found in no other animal, that zoologists have created for it a separate Family *(Antilocapra americana)*, which it occupies in solitary state," wrote William Temple Hornaday, director of the New York Zoological Society, in 1904. "It is like an island in a vast sea, unrelated . . . an animal more wonderful than the rarest orchid that ever bloomed."

TIM CHRISTIE

AMERICA'S SERENGETI The vast grasslands, abundant hoofed wildlife, and crawl-on-your-belly stalks make Montana antelope hunting akin to pursuing gazelle in Tanzania.

In Montana, we not only have the great opportunity to see this remarkable creature, but we also can hunt it in a manner that closely resembles an African safari.

AN EXPERT'S PERSPECTIVE

One of the greatest admirers and advocates of pronghorn was Bart O'Gara. For years head of the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at the University of Montana, O'Gara also co-authored two pronghorn books unparalleled in their scope and depth: *Prairie Ghost: Pronghorn and Human Interaction in Early America* and *Pronghorn Ecology and Management*.

O'Gara, who died in 2003, recognized the unique qualities of pronghorn and pronghorn hunting. "Now that free-ranging bison and elk have been nearly eliminated from their pristine habitats on the prairies, the pronghorn is the only big-game species truly at home on the wide plains and provides the only chance most North Americans have for a big game hunt on the prairie," he wrote. "Crawling over a landscape covered with cacti, sagebrush, sharp rocks, and an occasional rattlesnake to get close enough for a shot can be exciting."

Clearly, O'Gara felt the essence of antelope hunting was in the vastness of the plains, the calculated and painstaking stalk on foot (not to mention hands and knees), and the carefully placed, well-earned shot. He deplored the blast-away mentality of those he called "despoilers," who chase pronghorn with vehicles, "flock shoot," and fire at running animals.

"The sort of person who indulges in such pursuit, besides being a poor sport, lends needless credibility to the propaganda of individuals and groups that are inclined to label all hunting as unfair and inhumane," he wrote.

Though he shot his share of large pronghorn bucks, O'Gara believed that "any mature buck, fairly stalked and humanely killed, is a grand trophy."

In the hunting chapter of *Pronghorn Ecology and Management*, O'Gara notes that many new antelope hunters are surprised the animals are so unlike deer: "When seeking their first pronghorn, deer hunters soon discover a different kind of hunting. Deer are neutrally colored, blending into their habitat; pronghorn, with their contrasting color, are sharply visible. Although mule deer share parts of the pronghorn range, they usually shun the open terrain where pronghorn thrive. To detect danger, deer rely primarily on hearing and a keen sense of smell; pronghorn rely on their extraordinary sight. Deer use cover and stealth to escape peril; pronghorn avoid cover and depend on speed."

Within O'Gara's description of the differences between deer and pronghorn lie the basics of successful pronghorn hunting.

WHY VISIBLE DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN HUNTABLE

On the wide-open plains, it's easy for a hunter to see the leggy profiles of a distant pronghorn herd. The animals' distinct reddish tan backs and legs are highlighted by their stark

BUILT TO BOOK Pronghorn are the Formula One racers of Montana's big game. The ungulates are perfectly designed for life in the wide open, reaching speeds of 50 mph that leave even the fastest predator in the dust.

NEAL & MJ MISHLER

white rumps, bellies, neck bands, and cheek patches. Locating pronghorn is not a problem; the problem is how far away they are.

A pronghorn's primary means of protection is the ease with which it can see predators at a great distance. While you are checking out a herd of antelope with your 8x binoculars, they are probably checking you out with their 8x eyesight. What's more, the pronghorn's eyes, bulging from sockets that protrude from the skull, take in about 300 degrees of their surroundings. With a slight movement of its head, a pronghorn can see the entire landscape—with you in it. Hiding from that sweeping, exacting eyesight is a hunter's main job when pursuing pronghorn.

When stalking, stay low; don't skyline yourself atop hills or ridges. Most important, move slowly. Antelope eyes are especially attuned to the movement of predators. By standing as still as a sagebrush, you may be able to elude detection from a distance, even when you're in full view of these animals.

"As a general rule, whenever a person can see a buck's [white] cheek patch, that pronghorn is capable of detecting the human's movements," wrote O'Gara. Once it detects you, a pronghorn doesn't seek cover as deer do but rather takes off running, often for several miles before stopping.

Pronghorn are built to flee. Long, slender legs and massive lung capacity allow them to cover great distances quickly, just like African

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antelope. Pronghorn can reach a top speed of 45 to 50 miles per hour and can stay at 30 to 40 miles per hour for several miles. If they sense you are stalking them, the prairie racers can be in the next county before you have time to curse your bad luck or ineptitude.

"Pronghorn often race alongside and cross in front of vehicles, as if to prove they can," wrote O'Gara. "Such behavior is characteristic of open-country bovids of Africa." (It's also yet another reason hunting pronghorn from vehicles can hardly be considered sporting.)

HOW TO HUNT PRONGHORN

Though antelope hunting often requires covering a lot of ground, the hunt usually begins from a stationary position as the hunter scans the surrounding prairie from a high vantage point. Use binoculars or a spotting scope to glass the country and locate a pronghorn you're interested in stalking. Though most active around sunrise and sunset, the animals are selective eaters that often keep moving throughout the day, drifting across the plains in search of preferred foods such as wild blue flax and penstemon. The longer you scan the landscape, the more stalking possibilities you're likely to have.

It's not uncommon for other hunters in the area to spook the pronghorn you're watching. If that happens, watch where the animals go and remember which hills they skirt, what draws they follow, and where they end up. These will be places to hunt on other days.

Once you see a pronghorn you want to stalk, take a moment to make a plan. Be patient. Take time to survey the topography of

the surrounding plains and devise an approach route that will keep you out of the animal's sight while you move in close enough for a clean shot. Make mental notes of landmarks near your quarry so you can relocate the animal each time you peek over a rise.

The stalk is rarely a straight line between you and the pronghorn. You often must detour away from your quarry before circling in, a process that can take an hour or more. As you slowly move around the pronghorn, periodically check on its position, slowly easing your eyebrows up over a hill or ridge to peek through the vegetation, making sure the animal is still around. It's not uncommon for a hunter to make a long stalk, belly to the ground, only to find on rising that the pronghorn has wandered far away.

You'll often discover other antelope in this process of moving closer. Be ready to change your game plan as the hunt evolves, perhaps even to pursue one of the newly spotted animals. And check your back-trail frequently. While you are moving, antelope in the vicinity are also moving, and they may come in behind you. If you're not careful, you may scare these newcomers into flight, and they may spook the pronghorn you're after.

How close you need to get depends on your stalking ability, rifle, and marksmanship. Many skilled pronghorn hunters crave the challenge and excitement of creeping to within 100 yards of their target. The challenge here is seeing how close you can stalk, not how far you can shoot.

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LOW, SLOW, AND CLOSE The trick to hunting pronghorn is to move below the horizon so the eagle-eyed grazers don't make you out and dash to the next county. Unfortunately, a successful stalk often requires crawling across inhospitable terrain. Some hunters take long shots, but many try to creep to within 100 to 150 yards. Bipods or shooting sticks are great tools to help you make a single, accurate shot.

TIM CHRISTIE

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THE WELL-PLACED SHOT

While some hunters shoot at pronghorn 300 yards away or farther, most are uncomfortable trusting their marksmanship at that distance, and for good reason. "Range is deceptive on prairies and deserts, especially for hunters not accustomed to the country or game," wrote O'Gara. "A crawling hunter with eyes near the ground is at a disadvantage in estimating distances. Bright sunshine, clear air, and gleaming white hair often combine to make pronghorn appear closer than they are. Conversely, at dawn or dusk or on a stormy day, the animals seem to shrink and fade, appearing farther away than they actually are."

When you finally sneak to within range, take your shot from a prone, sitting, or kneeling position, not standing. And consider using a monopod or bipod to steady your rifle, which should be zeroed-in before the hunt. "For pronghorn hunting," O'Gara advised, "the best range to zero-in a rifle and load is 200 to 250 yards. With most pronghorn loads, a shot taken at half that distance will not be more than 2.5 inches high."

That well-placed shot ends your hunt, of course. Ideally, it will be the climax of a great adventure on the prairie. Maybe you glassed the crests and troughs of the rolling plains for hours; walked, ran, and crawled for miles, circling around knobs, ducking down draws, easing over rises with the smell of sage in your nostrils and the prairie wind cuffing your ears. Perhaps you watched hundreds of pronghorn, saw them group and scatter, drift and race across the grasslands like herds of Thomson's gazelle on the African veldt, giving you a sense of eastern Montana's immense distance and open space—and an appreciation of these extraordinary animals that make shortgrass prairies their home.

Every hunter wants to make a clean shot, and many hope for a trophy buck. But if O'Gara were still around, he'd probably tell you that pronghorn hunting is not so much about the kill or the horns but about understanding our sense of place within the vast prairie landscape that defines so much of Montana.

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MONTANA'S PRONGHORN NUMBERS ON THE REBOUND

They almost went the way of the bison. As many as 30 to 40 million pronghorn may have once roamed the North American plains. But during the late 19th century, homesteading on the prairies, fencing, livestock grazing, and market hunting reduced their numbers. By 1915, just 13,000 remained.

A 1924 survey put Montana's population at only 3,000. By the early 1980s, due largely to modern wildlife management that regulated hunting and restored habitat, pronghorn numbers in the state had climbed to around 160,000. Although the next decade of harsh winters, dry summers, poor forage, and heavy predation by coyotes cut the population in half, recent weather conditions have been more favorable for pronghorn, and numbers have begun to climb again.

"For the last two or three years we haven't really had any winter out here," says John Ensign, FWP regional wildlife manager in Miles City. "Over-winter antelope mortality has been fairly low. Also, we had excellent moisture this spring, so there's lots of forage. Antelope in southeastern Montana are doing really well."

In 2005, pronghorn numbers in Ensign's region—Montana's prime pronghorn area—were 48 percent above the ten-year average. "I suspect we're probably at those numbers or even a little higher this year," he says.

Graham Taylor, regional wildlife manager in Great Falls, sees a similar picture in his region. "It appears that in places we'll be at or approaching record all-time high numbers," he says. "Across the board, we don't have a single weak area in our antelope population."

The population also looks strong in the northeast, though it's still recovering from the harsh winter of 2003-04. "Numbers are not as high as they could be, but they're good—and better than last year," says Harold Wentland, regional wildlife manager in Glasgow.

Because much of the best pronghorn hunting opportunities are on private land, wildlife managers urge hunters to plan ahead. "Line up places to hunt before venturing out here," Ensign says. "We've been putting a lot of effort into securing nice antelope places in our Block Management Program. That's something hunters should explore."

For a quality hunt, Ensign suggests avoiding the opening week of the season. "Probably half our harvest occurs in that first week, and the bulk of that comes on the first weekend. If a person can go a little bit after the opener, their odds of getting on private ground improve."

And if you wait until after the deer and elk seasons open, when most big game hunters head for the mountains, coulees, and river bottoms, you can often have the open plains and their pronghorn pretty much all to yourself. ■

ERIK PETERSON

GOOD NEWS ON THE HORIZON The near future looks favorable for Montana's pronghorn population, thanks mainly to recent mild winters.