

PRONGHORN

Official Publication Of The Arizona Antelope Foundation, Inc., A Non-Profit, Tax-Exempt Corporation • Volume 6, Number 1 • Winter 1999

TO HELL AND BACK FOR A BUCK

by Jim Heffelfinger

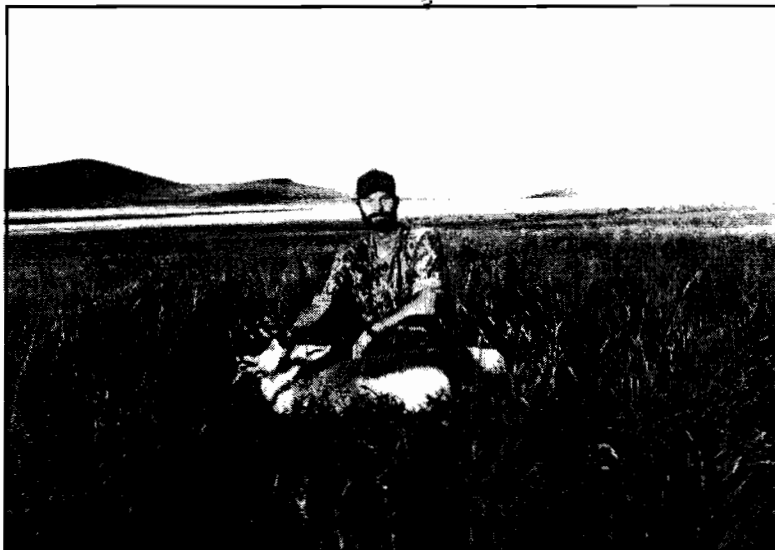
Pronghorn antelope are intriguing animals, being the sole survivors of a rather large family of variously horned ruminants that roamed North America up to the late Pleistocene. Their behavior and physiology is unlike that of the deer family in many respects. Ecologists say that prey species survived the gauntlet of evolution with one of 3 strategies; they got big (horses), got armor (turtles), or got out of the way. The pronghorn is truly an animal that has mastered the latter, being built for pure speed with long legs, large lung capacity, large windpipe, and very strong leg bones.

It is the fascination for the uniqueness of this animal that captivated me early on as a hunter and biologist. In September of 1995 I drew a permit to hunt this critter along the Arizona-New Mexico borders in GMU 30A.

Bucks remain in their territories throughout the breeding season in late summer, making it possible to locate several bucks before the hunting season with a good chance they will be nearby when it opens. Locating a good buck through a spotting scope is generally not the problem, getting within range for a shot on a grassland that is flat as a table top is the challenge. Most of the pronghorn habitat in this valley is state-owned land and open

to hunting for anyone properly permitted; however, the access into this valley crosses private land at almost all points and so permission from these landowners was imperative for a successful hunt.

After obtaining permission to gain access



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through most of the private land, I started getting familiar with the area and the pronghorn distribution. Weeks before the season opened, I was scouting the area with binoculars and camping in their grassland habitat to learn the lay of the land and where good bucks were setting up territories. The first day out I located a large buck with abnormal horns and another I came to call "Big V" because the horns did not curve inward as is typical and formed a large letter "V" as seen from the front. Big V had assembled a harem of 18 does, which indicated he was

one of the most dominant bucks in the area.

I continued to scout and saw many other bucks with harems but I couldn't get Big V out of my mind. I left my truck and walked east into an area that was more

than 2 miles from any road to look at this undisturbed portion of the valley. As I walked I flushed an incredible bachelor group of 9 desert mule deer bucks; the 3 largest being 5x5, 5x5, and 4x4 points. As with other deer species, mule deer bucks stay together during the antler growing period, working out their dominance hierarchy ahead of time so as not to waste too much energy when it counts.

As I continued along a small dry drainage, I suddenly became aware of unnatural designs on the large volcanic boulders lining my path. The rocks bore Native American petroglyphs of various designs pecked into the rocks long ago; possibly by an ancient hunter also in search of "America's Original Fast Food." I found no antelope in this secluded area and checked another area near an old volcanic crater which usually held pronghorn. I found a heavy-horned buck with very curved horns; this buck would no doubt score higher in the Boone and Crockett scoring system, but

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was not as attractive as Big V.

Before I was done looking at this heavy-horned buck, one of the violent summer thunderstorms this area is famous for rolled in and dumped rain at an incredible intensity. This part of Arizona receives 70% of its rainfall in the form of summer thunderstorms during June-August. The roads turned instantly into rivers and I had no choice but to crawl into the back of my enclosed pickup truck and slip into my bedroll, hoping for passable roads in the morning.

The next morning the roads were dry enough to allow me to make it out to the highway 6 miles to the west and head back to Douglas for more truck fuel and supplies. After returning to the area, I entered at a new access point to check out the more eastern side of the valley and stopped periodically to glass for pronghorn in the wide-open expanse of native grassland. At one stop my key would not restart the truck and no amount of pounding or short words would help. The old key was just too worn to operate the lock tumblers and after tearing the steering column apart I remembered I had wired an extra key to the underside of the truck some years ago. After 3 trips under the truck searching and more short words, I finally found the spare key and it started the truck!

I then traveled to the west side of the valley and set up camp south of what is known as Dry Lake - an honest name for an Arizona lake. After waking up to a serenade of coyote songs (by the original artists) I step out of the back of my truck and almost onto a tarantula out for a brisk morning walk past the back of my truck. The scaled quail were making the best of the summer rains and calling vigorously with their "chug-chur" call. On the morning before the hunt opened, about 1 hour after daylight, a black thunder storm

rolled in through the nearby mountain pass and out onto the valley floor; then, knowing it missed me, changed directions and came directly over me to dump more rain and hail stones the size of lemon drops.

The rain subsided and after the roads dried out a bit I decided to try to drive an old road that used to connect Dry Lake with the area to the south — the area Big V has set up his territory. I didn't get far when I misjudged a muddy crossing and slid into a gully. I left the truck and struck off on foot for a few hours until the mud dried enough for me to unload all gear and edge my way out of the quagmire. I then saw another storm rolling in from the west and made a break for the highway, knowing that with any more rain I may be stuck in this area for days. The brunt of the storm hit me when I was still 1 mile from the highway; my teenage experience driving fast and reckless is the only thing that got me to the highway.

I drove the highway around to another access point that has better roads and, most importantly, will take me to the Big V's area. Although I have seen over 25 other bucks, he is the one I want to stalk on opening morning. A couple miles into this access point and I came to a large pool of water in the road at the bottom of a drainage that must be traversed to get to any area with pronghorn before the opening of the season the next day. I stopped the truck and walked down to inspect the depth of the water. It was too deep for even my reckless driving and wasn't draining — prognosis for a successful hunt looked poor. After scraping with my boot, then a coffee can, I was able to dig a small trench that started the water slowly flowing off to the side of the pool and incrementally lowered the water level ever so slowly. After several hours I decided to try it; either I sleep in the mud or I get through to locate Big V. I unloaded all

my equipment to make the truck lighter and raced the truck down the hill and through the mud hole enveloped in a huge wave of mud, then quickly stood on the brakes to avoid missing the 90 degree turn right after the mud.

After reloading all my gear into the truck, I located Big V near the area I had last seen him and watched him and his harem for the rest of the afternoon. The goal in pronghorn hunting is to find a buck and "put him to bed" the evening before you will stalk him. Pronghorn rely on their eyesight for protection and do not wander about in the dark; they can generally be found at daybreak very near where they bedded down. I watched Big V and his ladies until it was too dark to see from my vantage point in an old corral-loading chute. Studying the lay of the topography, I planned my entire stalk to his location as darkness fell on the grassland valley. My plan was to sleep in place and leave camp under the cover of darkness in the early morning hours to stalk without a light using the mental map of the land I had memorized before darkness.

At 3 am I awoke and readied myself in total darkness. As I sat on my tailgate eating breakfast in the dark, a great-horned owl swooped at my head, no doubt thinking (until the last minute) my movements represented some small mammal. On final approach, it could see I was a rather large mammal and aborted the mission. At 0340 I left the truck and stumbled along the drainage that I have calculated will lead me to a point within 300 yards of the buck. It is my plan to arrive at this point before it gets light and wait for daylight from a concealed location. After much struggling in the dark among the boulders and thorny scrub in the drainage, I began wondering about the big neurotoxic Mohave rattlesnakes that are active at night during this time of year. At 0430, I moved quietly past a 4x4 wooden post, which I recognized as being only 1/3 of the way to my goal. Clearly my plan was flawed; daylight was

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ASSESSMENT OF EFFECTS OF PREDATOR CONTROL ON ARIZONA PRONGHORN POPULATIONS — *Proposal for Review paper*

Pronghorn antelope populations have declined throughout Arizona over the past decade. Causes are variously given as effects of climate on food supply, hence pronghorn productivity; habitat loss due to urbanization and subsequent fragmentation; and, increasing effects of predation by coyotes on pronghorn fawns. Because predation is the only one of these potential factors that can be directly managed, pronghorn hunters in Arizona are pressing for increased coyote reduction efforts to protect pronghorn fawns. However, Arizona has a long history of coyote reduction in pronghorn habitats, reaching back to the eras of strychnine and 1080. Recent coyote reduction efforts have been short-term (1-3 year) spring aerial gunning programs in a few Wildlife Management Units, designed to relieve coyote predation on newborn fawns. These short-term efforts have not yielded consistent or measurable increases in fawn survival, or, especially, on pronghorn population levels.

The Arizona Antelope Foundation is considering a recommendation to the Arizona Game and Fish Commission for a longer-term, scientifically designed evaluation of effects of coyote reduction on pronghorn populations. This project would use pronghorn special tag moneys to significantly reduce coyote numbers in a selected study area for a period long enough to provide irrefutable evaluation of predator reduction effects. This study would include an untreated comparison area, and ultimately, reversal of the two areas for confirmation of effects. Before entering such an expensive project, the Foundation wants to review the history of predator control in pronghorn habitats in Arizona and to synthesize technical literature in other states on the value of predator control. The Foundation is soliciting proposals for a detailed literature review of the effects of predator control on coyote populations as it relates to Arizona pronghorn populations.

The product of this project would be a detailed written report and an oral presentation to the Arizona Antelope Foundation board. The report would cover:

1. History of coyote control in pronghorn habitat in Arizona, with assessment of effects on historic pronghorn populations.
2. A review of professional journal articles, books, and Federal Aid reports from all states with pronghorn populations summarizing the available information on the value of coyote control for increasing pronghorn populations. This review may require assessment of effects of interactions of nutrition and predation on pronghorn productivity.

Anyone interested in this project should submit a proposal to David E. Brown, Tech-

nical Advisory Committee, Arizona Antelope Foundation, P.O. Box 15505, Phoenix, Arizona 85060-5501. Proposals will include a short (1-2 page) description of the consultant's approach to the project, a one-page description of the consultant's qualifications, and a bid for the project cost. This proposal is due by **January 15, 1999**. Funding of the project will be dependent upon approval of use of antelope tag funds for this purpose by the Arizona Antelope Foundation and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Notification of acceptance of bid will be on or before **March 1, 1999**. The report and oral presentation will be due six months after the contractor has been notified of bid acceptance.

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nearly upon me.

By 0530 the eastern sky is turning pink and I had to leave the concealment of the drainage to get within range of the buck's bedsite. This is the part of the stalk that I most needed the cover of darkness. As I crept towards the buck's presumed location the sky became lighter and lighter and I could not find enough vegetation to hide a rabbit. As the ambient light increased, I had no choice but to find a grass clump and lay flat behind it. As the light increased, I saw Big V over 600 yards away (!) with most of his harem. With no cover for a final approach, I had hoped to be within my comfortable shooting range of 300 yards.

As I tried to develop a plan that did not involve the word "tomorrow", I heard a doe antelope behind me running and blowing in alarm. I knew immediately that I had been busted by one of his ladies. I decided to flatten my body as much as possible behind my grass clump and

hope that the situation cooled down enough for them to resume normal activity. The doe kept blowing and finally ran off. Soon after, I heard the sound of hooves galloping closer; thinking it was the doe returning, I raised my head and was astonished to see Big V standing at 40 yards! He was straining to see what this strange object was in his territory. As strange as this seems, it is well-documented that pronghorn are very curious; reports abound that even Native Americans used to crawl through the grass and wave their foot or a small flag to attract pronghorn within range. Not wanting to keep him wondering too long, I made one smooth motion of retrieving my rifle, sliding off the safety, and getting the rifle into position. The cross hairs found the base of his neck, the rifle jumped, and Big V folded where he stood. I could scarcely believe what had just transpired; after weeks of work, planning, and torturous situations, the buck I had my eye on all along gave himself to me. It seems curiosity kills more than cats.