

# HUNTER'S ★ HORN™



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# A VERY PLEASANT CONCEIT

By John Wootters

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*“Horse,” I grunt, “you and I are going to come to an understanding!” I’m using the polite mode of address, having just been introduced to this horse; later in the day I’ll switch to the familiar form: “you knotheaded sonofabitch!”*

Actually, it’s as good a place as any for a private rodeo, on a lonesome yellow road snaking across the velvety, gray-green Wyoming prairie, with neither tree nor fence between the vast horizons. I’m at home in the saddle and don’t mind riding a snuffy horse, but on this particular October morning I’ve got other things on my mind. My mount dances and tosses his head against the hard held bit, circling, challenging me for his freedom; I feel the power and eagerness of him surging up through my thighs. He wants to run, to drink the morning wind, but I want to go hunting. The black horse has never before carried a hunter, and I’ve never hunted pronghorn antelope from horseback before, so we’re about even. After a few minutes of tense testing of wills, the horse and I do indeed arrive at the promised “understanding”. He yields, grudgingly, deciding not to buck, and the expedition gets underway.

My three companions mount and we strike out up a dry wash, the horses puffing frosty clouds from their nostrils and

lathering quickly despite the cold. The sun is just over the eastern hills, slanting up into the coppery blue bowl of the Wyoming sky. Shortly, we turn out of the wash and begin to climb into broken hills. Penetrating a badlands area where vehicle-borne hunters cannot go, our strategy is to probe into terrain where pronghorns are less plentiful but rarely disturbed, hoping to find trophy bucks bossing herds which haven’t heard a rifle shot. The strategy will succeed, but we have no way of being sure; not even our guides, Al Baier and Bobby McKee, have ever hunted antelope from horseback before.

For the moment, I hardly care, so intoxicating is the pungence of sage and the feel of a fresh, strong horse between my knees. It’s enough simply to be there with all my senses in good working order. I grin across at Jack Carter, an old and well-tried companion on many kinds of hunts, from an African safari to “Texas whitetails. His answering grin is perhaps just a shade less joyous than mine; Jack is not so accustomed to riding and already entertains doubts about a whole day, or several days,



Downed at only 17 paces, the old buck missed the Boone & Crockett lists by just three points.

in the saddle. But I know him much too well to worry about his reaction if and when the going turns tough. We are here because it seemed to both of us that this would be a good way, an honest way to hunt, and not because we imagined that it might be easy.

The tactics are similar to those used against mountain sheep, but without the mountains. We plan to ride the ridges of the rough country, pausing to glass the basins for antelope. The animals are accustomed to riders on the skyline in this country where the mounted cowboy is still the only way to work cattle. When we locate pronghorns, we will dismount and use spotting scopes to sort out potential trophy bucks. When one is spotted, we will make the final stalk on foot.

The guides have scouted the country thoroughly, and it's obvious they know where to look. Occasionally they dismount under the crest of a hill and walk up to check the other side while Jack and I sit on our puffing horses and wait for a signal. From our elevation, we can look out across the badlands to the north, where the prairie breaks off into rough, sandy, scrub-brush terrain that doesn't look like pronghorn country. It looks like outlaw country, and it is just that; we are only a few miles

from the site of the original Hole-in-the-Wall, where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid hid themselves and their gang. Gazing at the badlands, it's easy to understand why the hideout was never discovered; combing out that country on horseback would require a posse's lifetime.

Presently, after several reconnaissances, Al waves us down from our saddles, we scramble up the pitch of the ridge to where Al is bellied down behind his spotting scope. We follow his finger with our binoculars and pick out a group of tan-and-white dots about two miles away. I feel the ancient twist in my guts that the first glimpse of game always triggers. The herd is a big one, and we can make out several black-horned bucks as the animals move about in the brilliant sunlight. Once more, the old white-tail hunter in me wonders at the boldness of pronghorns. They don't give a damn if you can see them, just as long as they can see you; I'm not used to animals which are so casually conspicuous in their habitat.

While Al squints through his 40% telescope, Jack and I pick out other pronghorns in the basin, a single buck only a few hundred yards below us, and another pair near a windmill in the distance. The single has seen us and is steadily walking

toward us, staring. I remember the stories about “flagging up” pronghorns in the old days, taking advantage of their curiosity. It doesn’t work very many places nowadays, I’m told, and this buck’s actions convince me that we really are into some undisturbed country. Our lenses make it clear, however, that he isn’t what we came for.

Finally, Baier grunts and rolls over. “Too far to be certain,” he says, “but I think we’ll have to go and take a closer look at the boss buck in that bunch.” We mount and wind our way around a knob and down into the flat. As always, in the presence of game, my pulse has accelerated, but the feeling is too familiar to surprise or worry me. We ride silently, each with his own thoughts.

Leaving the horses in a sandy blow-out, out of sight of the herd, we make a preliminary stalk. About 500 yards from the animals we run out of cover, but Al now seems excited about the biggest buck in the group. Very excited, I find it contagious.

Al surveys the ground before us and the aimless, steady drift of the animals. They are north of a subtle roll of hills separated by shallow saddles. We can swing south and make a big circle, approaching through one of the draws for a close shot. It doesn’t look too difficult to me, provided the herd is still there when we get into position.

We scuttle backwards, crabwise, over the knob, to reach a point where we can stand up without showing ourselves, and swing off to the southwest at a fast walk. Al, in the lead, drops back to say, “That’s a hell of a buck, John! A hell of a buck, maybe in the record book!”

He shouldn’t have said that. It won’t make it any easier to shoot well when the time comes.

IN 20 minutes, we are on hands and knees, creeping the last few yards to the saddle from which we expect to shoot. I’m concentrating on advancing the rifle without gouging the muzzle into the earth, on trying to stay out of the omnipresent, low-scrub cactus, and, mostly, fighting for calmness. Suddenly, Al frantically gestures for me to stop and get down. I flop face down in the dust and wait for him to crawl back to me.

“They put out a sentinel doe,” he says, “and we almost blundered right over her. We’ll have to go back and around and up the next draw. It’ll be a much longer shot.” I nod, too dry-mouthed to reply, and we begin the retreat.

Another 15 minutes of walking puts us under the lip of the next saddle, and it’s hands-and-knees time again. It’s along crawl, staring at the soles of Al’s boots, stopping to watch him cautiously lift his head and then duck down and scramble a little farther. The old familiar pressure is building; within minutes, Al will have done his job, and it will be my turn to perform. I hope the shot will not be too long, and, for that matter, that it’s broadside, in the clear, and at a standing animal. Mostly, I hope I won’t blow the shot.

Then I can see pronghorns between the stunted clumps of sage, and my fears melt away in the intensity of the search for the right animal, the searing effort to appraise the situation. On knees and elbows, rifle cradled across my arms, I scuttle ahead a bit to find a sagebrush bush over which I can rest the rifle. The herd is 200 yards out, maybe a bit more, and milling. There are five mature bucks. One stands out.

“Do you see him?,” Al hisses, “He’s the one whose horns almost touch. When he looks this way, they’re almost a perfect

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On hands and knees, they wait for the perfect shot.



heart shape. Make sure you've got the right one. Don't shoot 'til you're sure!"

His voice sounds very far away now. Suddenly, I'm calm, as I knew I would be but feared I wouldn't be. This is my moment; my judgement must rule. Al can only wait and watch, as can Bobby and Jack on their distant knoll. I pick up the buck in the scope's field, making trial fittings of the crosshairs against his shoulder as he moves in and out of the herd, Al is saying something else, but the words don't get through. My whole being is focussed through that telescopic sight, riveted on the burly shoulder of the pronghorn. Suddenly he breaks clear of the other animals, broadside, trotting. My automatic sequences take over: the crosshairs grab the buck rigidly, the rifle rams back against my shoulder, silently, and the sound of the bullet striking floats back. Baier is all over me, pounding me on the back and hollering, yelling something about "Good shot!". The bullet had cut the buck down like a scythe, but I've racked the bolt back and slammed it home behind a fresh round, and it's a good thing. The buck is struggling to his feet, obviously unable to move far, but a second bullet is needed to end the thing.

The shot is always the climax. After that, the mixed emotions take over, the satisfaction of having taken this buck honestly and finding that his horns are very good, mingled with the inevitable instant of regret that he no longer lives on this prairie, under this sky.

The stalk has required 45 minutes. The shot measures 230 yards. He is by far the finest pronghorn I've taken. Riding back to the horse trailer, leading the packhorse carrying my buck, I am full.

The hunt, of course, is only half-done. Jack's buck is to come next day, miles back into the badlands and very close to the old Hole-in-the-Wall. This one is a real outlaw, old and heavy-horned and completely by himself. In fact, he is the only pronghorn we are to see all that day, and we see him only because we have stopped on a low ridge to glass a herd of wild horses about a mile away. Jack thinks he has seen another animal, off to one side, but none of the rest of us can make out anything at all. Jack insists, and we keep looking, until we are finally able to locate the one tiny white speck which resolves itself into a pronghorn, and a buck, as he turns with the sun.

Because Carter has insisted, we have now spotted a buck which will miss the record lists by less than three points.

The situation seems almost impossible, as we stretch out on the ridge behind spotting scopes and binoculars. The animal appears to be nervous, alerted. He paces back and forth indecisively, looking this way and that, and chances are slim that he'll stay put long enough to complete the laborious stalk which will be required. Even so, we resolve to try for him, and the hunters set off into the malpais, leaving me alone on the ridge to watch.

It's a long and exciting show. The antelope's marvelous eyes pick up a movement almost as soon as the stalk begins, and his restlessness increases. He remains in sight for perhaps 20 minutes, and then disappears. I cannot relocate him, and assume, as the minutes drag out, that the cause is lost.

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Hunting on horseback, the author pursued pronghorn according to his own personal code of ethics. The results were dramatic.

"Then comes a muffled shot, and a moment later a figure appears on a sandhill, waving me in. I discover that Jack has shot a buck, obviously the same one we'd been watching, under circumstances which might be termed exceptional for pronghorns. With a little backtracking, we piece the story together and realize that while the hunters were stalking the buck, the buck was stalking them. When Jack lifted his eyeballs over the crest of a sandhill, expecting to see the antelope maybe 300 yards away, he discovered the animal walking broadside only ten steps away on the other side of the hill.

The buck hit fourth gear in about three strides as Jack swung the rifle to cover him, led him like a crossing quail, and flattened him at precisely 17 yards from the muzzle! That's the shortest shot I've ever heard of on pronghorns, and it occurs to me as I gaze down at the beautiful old outlaw that it likely will be the shortest I will ever hear of, much less see.

Those 17 footprints in the sand of southwestern Wyoming seem to me to sum up this whole excursion. It has been a hunt, and not merely a shoot. [It has been done fairly, done honestly, with all dues paid and all benefits duly earned. It has been done somewhat after the fashion of the early plainsmen. Not really, of course; they had no 7mm Magnum rifles with telescopic sights, no horse trailers to shorten the ride, no jets to set them down in antelope country a couple of hours away from a home more than 1,000 miles away. Surely it's vanity to imagine that we have taken the two fine trophies exactly as the pioneers might have.

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*Mr. Wootters, a former HSC President, passed away in January of 2013. HSCF greatly appreciates his wife, Jeanne McRae Wootters, for sharing his legacy and wisdom. [johnwootters.com](http://johnwootters.com)*