

Outdoors

What about pronghorn?

Every hunter has his favorite game animals. The pronghorn antelope of the western prairies is not mine. He can't hold a candle to a whitetail buck for IQ, and his is one of the very few North American wild meats that I don't like.

He does have two things going for him. He has eyes that might make an eagle go shopping for a white cane, and he can run like the wind. He is said to be the fastest quadruped in North America and I believe it. I suspect that he may be the fastest on any continent.

The African cheetah is supposed to be capable of 60 miles per hour, but I have personally clocked a Texas pronghorn at 64 or 65 mph ... and I wasn't certain that the antelope was tapping the peg even then. The cheetah might be faster in a sprint, but a pronghorn has good staying power in distance. He has the machinery, huge lungs, trachea, and an oversized heart to pump oxygenated blood to straining leg muscles.

He runs so fast that I've seen good, experienced riflemen trying to hit a buck going flat-out misjudge the lead required on a crossing shot so badly that they accidentally killed another animal running 10 or 12 yards behind the target.

Many hunters allege that the wide-open terrain and the pronghorn's phenomenal vision force them to try very long shots. In my day I was known as a fair-to-middlin' long-range rifle shot, but the longest shot I ever had to make on a pronghorn buck was a modest – and measured – 220 yards. The shortest was about 35 yards and my average might be under 100. (I did most of my pronghorn hunting before I ever heard of a laser rangefinder.)

Unlike most game animals, pronghorn antelope are fairly conspicuous in their chosen habitat. The big white erectile rump patch can be seen for miles in the clear mountain air, by me ... and farther by another antelope. The physiology of a pronghorn's eyeballs is such that he's looking at you with a pair of biologi-

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cal binoculars that actually magnify the images that reach his brain.

The fact is that an antelope buck really doesn't give a damn whether you can see him as long as he can see you. And, boy, can he ever see you out on those plains! A good working rule of thumb is that if you can see him, he already saw you about 20 minutes earlier.

He is not invulnerable, however. There are weaknesses in his armor. One is that he's a creature of habit; where you saw him yesterday, he may well be again tomorrow, going the same places by the same routes. Another chink is he will not jump over a live-stock fence that a deer sails over so effortlessly that you might think he had wings. The pronghorn, therefore, is always looking for holes in fences or places with a broken wire. If you find it first, he's as good as yours.

He also knows all the narrow spots in creeks or ranch roads, as well as breaks in escarpments and similar "choke points" in his territory. Another useful tidbit of pronghorn hunting intelligence is the location of each tank and stock pond on his beat, and he will usually spend a good part of his day at or near one of them.

For the hunter, all this points to the importance of serious scouting for a big pronghorn buck. It may even be more critical on antelope than on whitetail bucks ... but please don't tell anybody I said that! If you can spend at least two days scouting for every day you'll actually hunt, you should at least get a chance at a better-than-average buck. All your driving and glassing may pay off with one of those short shots with which I've been so blessed.

One of these happened when, while scouting on a large ranch near Marfa, I observed a herd with a nice



Photos by John Wootters

This is Wootters' lifetime best pronghorn buck. Taken in Wyoming, his horns are a little over 16 inches long. The author hunted on horseback until the herd was located, whereupon he dismounted and crawled on his belly to within 220 yards for the shot.



This is an average good buck, with 13-inch horns, fair weight, and good prongs.

buck in it using a shallow draw enroute to a waterhole. I got someone to let me out before daylight on the waterhole end of the pass. I set up for about a 40-yard shot, and, sure enough, the buck's herd appeared exactly where I expected it shortly after dawn. I hammered the buck stone dead in his tracks, but did not approach him where he lay.

Instead, I picked up my spent cartridge case and cigarette butts, brushed out what little sign I'd made, and hiked about 350 yards, where I sat down to await my ride. When my buddies arrived, they looked around and saw no dead antelope.

"We heard you shoot early. Where is he?" was the question. Finally I pointed the carcass out, 'way over yonder.

"Wow!, was the reaction, "What a shot!" They were talking about that shot for years. But, notice that I never claimed to have fired from where they found me sitting.

They jumped to that conclusion by themselves, and I just never denied it.

There's more than one way to build a reputation!

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.