

CROSS HAIR



CONSULTING



Pronghorn Paradise

by Bob Robb : Published in Safari



The season only lasts two days, but New Mexico's firearms pronghorn hunt is about as fun as hunting the western U.S. can be -- and the trophy quality is unmatched.

The weather in mid-September in the high plains of east-central New Mexico is a conundrum. One day it can be hot and dry, with dust devils spiraling high into the sky that wreck your sinuses. Next day, dark storm clouds can roll in, bringing with them strong winds and a driving rain that turn dirt roads to a slick, sloppy mess. One must be prepared for all contingencies.

The weekend of September 12-13, 2009, was a little of both. It was also the dates of the annual two-day New Mexico rifle pronghorn season. We didn't care about the weather – we were prepared for everything and ready to roll!

In New Mexico, sportsmen can obtain a license to hunt pronghorn in two ways – through a public drawing or by obtaining a private-land authorization. Applications for the public land drawing are due in early April. Ranches participating in the of that receive these authorizations can be found at the New Mexico Game & Fish Department's website, www.wildlife.state.nm.us/.



In both 2007 and 2009 I chose to hunt New Mexico through the A-PLUS system, booking my hunts both years with Antelope Adventures, based in the small ranching community of Ft. Sumner. Antelope Adventures is really a small consortium of local ranchers that have pooled their available buck tags, something that permits them to book several hunters while combining meals and camp facilities. "In 2009 we had an aggregate of nearly 120,000 acres to hunt," said Randel Mansell, who ramrods the hunting program. Professionally, Mansell is an agent for Farm Bureau Financial Services in Fort Sumner. What he really likes to do, though, is



shoot and hunt. "We had a total of 20 buck permits in 2009 and, for management purposes, chose to hunt 17 of them. This is about the number of permits we have received annually for several years."

In their 10 years of hunting, Antelope Adventures has run virtually 100 percent success. "One year we had a guy who chose not to shoot because he was looking for something truly exceptional and didn't see it, but other than that we have not had a hunter go home without a pronghorn in 10 seasons," Mansell said. "We use only local ranchers as our guides, guys who know the country and essentially see these animals almost every day of the year. They know where they like to hang out, how to travel the backcountry roads, and how to hunt this country. It's a big advantage. It also allows us to easily coordinate our hunt so that we do not have hunters running all over each other."

One man who has been hunting with Antelope Adventures for many seasons is SCI member Wade Derby (pictured below right) of California, who is the booking agent of record for the outfit (925-679-9232; www.crosshairconsulting.com). Derby is a highly-experienced international hunter with extensive experience in the western U.S. "Even though there isn't a record book goat around every corner I have yet to consistently find pronghorn of this quality on such a reasonably priced hunt anywhere else,"

Derby told me in camp. "On top of that, all the ranchers and guides are great folks who bend over backwards to make sure you are both successful and have a great time. The bunkhouse (really a ranch house with showers and all the amenities, including cable TV) is comfortable, and there is space to bring your own RV or trailer if you would rather sleep there. They feed you until your pop, there's an unlimited supply of soft drinks and bottled water, and the guides will care for your animal once it is down. You just can't beat it." Hunters can either drive their own rigs or fly into Albuquerque and rent a car for the three-hour drive to camp.

"We want everyone to come and have a good time," Mansell said. "We welcome first-time hunters, spouses and kids, too. You do not have to shoot the first buck you see, you can take your time and have fun. If you kill one early you are welcome to stay all weekend and hunt coyotes – and we love coyote hunters! – and tour the historical sites around Ft. Sumner. The last thing we want to do is make someone feel rushed."

OpeningDay

After a good night's sleep following the camp's ritual Friday night steak feed (how can a man sleep after all that good food?) Wade and I jumped in the truck with our guide, Hadley, and headed off in the pre-dawn darkness. Hadley had been watching a very nice buck on the ranch where my permit was valid for some time, and we wanted to check him out first.

As the sun tried to peek over the eastern horizon it was blocked by dark clouds that ominously filled the sky. In the distance thunder rolled, lightning flashed, and rain was coming down in buckets, but fortunately for us we only got drizzled on. The terrain is essentially flat, cut with some rolling hills, washes and gullies, the ground covered with sagebrush and several varieties of cactus. That means the way to hunt it is to access the area on the dirt tracks, then set up and glass. Once you spot





a short break for lunch and to return to camp where I could hang my buck, then we were back at it. By noon about half the hunters had punched out and were lounging about, telling tall tales and enjoying the break in the weather. We headed back out, glassing several small herds of pronghorn. We never did see goofy head, but late in the day Wade finally found one he liked. We were able to get in front of this bunch as they traveled across the prairie, and Wade's shot of under 100 yards didn't really test either his shooting skills or the capabilities of his custom .300 Jarrett in the

When the sun went down there were just four hunters who had yet to fill their tags, a task completed before noon on Sunday. Once again Antelope Adventures had run 100 percent success on bucks averaging about 77 SCI.

A GREAT HUNT: Because Cheryl and I love pronghorn burger so much, I was able to beg a couple of extra animals from some of the hunters who were not going to take their meat home. So before dinner on Saturday night I spent a couple of hours boning out meat and getting it iced down. Three days later we had 65 pounds of prime burger in the freezer along with some backstraps and tenderloins. Being able to drive to the hunt has more advantages than being flexible with your own rig!

a buck you like, a stalk is planned and away you go. At times that can involve hands-and-knees skittering through the sage, avoiding the thorny cactus as best you can, always keeping an eye out for the abundant prairie rattler – of which we saw several, but thankfully all were on the dirt roads. Shots can be relatively close or “way out there.” For that reason I chose to bring a Weatherby Vanguard MOA rifle topped with a 2.5-10X Bushnell Elite 4200 scope and chambered in .257 Weatherby Magnum loaded with factory Weatherby ammo featuring the 115-grain Nosler Ballistic Tip bullet. This rig chronographs 3350 fps and groups three shots into a nice little $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch cluster at 100 yards all day long. Sighted in to print three-inches high at 100 yards, all I had to do was hold on hair out to 400 yards. least. Just like that, opening day was over and we both had pronghorn bucks down that scored right around 78 SCI points.

Despite the weather it wasn't an hour before we spotted the buck Hadley had spoken of herding a large group of does. The ground was flat and cover scarce, and so we bided our time and waited for them to move into a better spot for a stalk and shot. In less than an hour they did just that, and my shot was only about 150 yards. In less than two hours my hunt was over. Wade still had his tag, and we spent the day searching for a goofy-horned buck Hadley had seen previously. We took





Why New Mexico?

When most sportsmen first think about hunting pronghorn, they think of states where there are lots and lots of them – specifically, Wyoming and Montana, where the majority of North America's pronghorn population can be found. However, if you are looking for really big bucks -- the kind that can make the top tier of the SCI record book -- you have to head further south, to New Mexico.

According to the SCI Online Record Book (www.scirecord-book.org), one of the best hunting reference sources on the planet), of the top 27 pronghorn bucks taken all-time, 20 have come from New Mexico (with four from Arizona and three from Utah). The No. 1 buck is a behemoth that scores 99 7/8 and was taken by John Grimmett back in September, 1986.

Annually, Antelope Adventures' clients generally take at least one, and often several, bucks that score over 80 SCI. In 2009 two of the 17 bucks taken scored over 80, and the camp average was right at their 10-year camp average of 77 SCI -- truly astounding. -- Bob Robb.

The Weatherby Vanguard MOA Rifle

When I went searching for a new long-range rifle specifically to handle deer-sized game, I chose the Weatherby Vanguard MOA in .257 Weatherby Magnum. The cartridge is inherently accurate, has an extremely flat trajectory, and has plenty of downrange pop for

these kinds of animals. With a suggested retail price of right around a grand, the rifle itself is a heckuva deal for such an accurate, high-quality factory rifle. Mine features a pillar-bedded Fiberguard composite stock with a Monte Carlo raised cheek piece and non-slip black spiderwebbing, stainless steel metalwork bead blasted to matte finish, a Pachmyr Decelerator recoil pad, and weighs in at 7 ¾ lbs. unscoped and unloaded. Best of all, like all MOA rifles it is guaranteed to shoot three shots into less than one inch at 100 yards using specified Weatherby factory or premium ammunition. In the case of my rifle, this is Weatherby Factory ammo featuring the 115-grain Nosler Ballistic Tip bullet.

I added Millet scope mounts and a 2.5-10X Bushnell Elite 4200 riflescope and Butler Creek sling, and this rifle is just what the doctor ordered for hunting where shots just might be "way out there." -- Bob Robb.