

SKULL

AN OUTFITTER'S JOURNAL

DECOYS IN
SEPTEMBER
PRODUCE
BIG GOATS

84"
WENDY'S
MUZZ
GOAT

A SANDY HILLS HUNTING PUBLICATION
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STEPPED ON

Hunting Pronghorn antelope with a muzzleloader is a challenging, yet incredibly fun hunt. In a single day of hunting it is not at all uncommon to see 500 antelope and the only time you aren't hunting is when you need food and fuel. We cover A LOT of miles during this season going from ranch to ranch as we are constantly filtering through the vast numbers of animals to find a trophy, which is a task in and of itself. Pronghorn aren't exactly the easiest animals to field judge, especially in Eastern Colorado where the bucks don't get the horn length like the animals in Arizona and parts of New Mexico. Instead, they achieve their record book numbers with above average mass and cutter length which isn't easy to judge from long distances through a spotting scope while fighting through the heat waves you almost always encounter during antelope seasons. You may be thinking, "well just get closer dummy." That, my friend, is easier said than done... with their extremely

large eyes sitting more on the outside of their heads, a pronghorn not only has a 320-degree field of view, but their eyesight is said to be the equivalent to a human looking through 8 power binoculars. Almost everyone knows pronghorn are fast. Their enlarged heart and lungs also give them the ability to maintain a speed of 35 mph for 2-3 miles. So while getting closer is possible chances are you will be seen and the question then becomes how far will he go and will I be able to find him again if he gets spooked before we get in range? With today's rifles and long-range muzzleloaders "within range" is a relative term, however in Colorado, no muzzleloader can be equipped with a scope of any sort which severely limits your effective shooting distance given the fact that the front sight on most muzzleloaders will almost completely cover a mature buck at 100 yards. Add all of that up and I think we have exceeded the criteria for challenging and full of action.

You might be wondering what kind of odd definition I have for fun when every stalk seems to be doomed before it ever begins? Well, Pronghorn are very territorial during the rut as a mature buck will often chase smaller bucks a half mile or more away from his herd of does in his attempt to maintain dominance. They are very curious animals as well as they will routinely approach white plastic grocery bags and random trash caught in fence lines and yucca plants. Put these two characteristics, as well as their keen eyesight together and you have yourself a great opportunity to use a decoy to your advantage. A decoy, if used correctly, can not only trigger the buck's instinct to protect his ladies from intruding, lesser bucks but even their curious nature alone can draw them within range of a well-placed decoy. This is when it gets fun, and it brings to mind one of the funnest and most exciting muzzleloader antelope hunts I have ever been a part of. Back in 2018

Kenny and Wendy O'Donnell came out to eastern Colorado for a muzzleloader antelope hunt and got to experience firsthand the fun and excitement a hunt like this provides. Not only were we in the middle of antelope from sun-up on day one on, but the rut was in full swing and everywhere we looked there were bucks chasing and fighting for their right to every herd of does we came across. Jeremy was also along with us as and behind the camera as he was between hunts and had a little bit of free time. Fortunately for all of us this worked out as we had no idea what we were about to get into and probably would not have been believed had we not got it on film.

Day one started off great as we saw a bunch of antelope and it wasn't too late in the day when we found one of the bigger bucks we had seen while scouting that summer. He was very, very heavy, had great cutters and his curls were going to add a lot to



his length. What's more, he was with a single doe and they were in some small canyon country which provided plenty of cover for a stalk. We had a great opportunity, and we knew we had to take advantage of the situation quickly. We got ready and started out on our stalk. We hadn't made it far when I caught a glimpse of the tops of his horns silhouetted against the blue sky. We had to cover about 300 yards and had a couple of draws to cross, but we got eyes on him first which tipped the advantage scale hugely in our direction. Without much of an issue we slipped up to the base of the hill I saw him on earlier so I started to carefully ease my way up the hill, searching back and forth for any indication that he was still there. Then, there they were! A couple of ivory tipped horns less than 75 yards away. Wendy crept up next to me and we quietly got her set up on the shooting sticks and got ready for a shot, the whole time he and his doe completely oblivious to our presence. The plan was to get Wendy set and let the antelope keep feeding up the opposite side of the draw and into our view for a shot, which worked out perfectly! We heard the bullet hit and I saw the antelope turn and run back towards us before we were engulfed in the thick haze left behind by Wendy's smoke pole. Not knowing where he was hit or exactly which direction he was going to head, we got back down the hill and immediately got Wendy reloaded. Once she was ready, I eased my way back up the hill searching a full 360 degrees for any sign of an antelope. Fortunately, without much effort I found him about 150 yards downhill from us. He was obviously hit and extremely sick as he was not





moving much so we quietly slipped around a couple of small knolls and quickly got within 50 yards. Wendy took full advantage of the second shot and dropped the buck in his tracks! The buck had some great character and ended up stretching the tape just over 82 inches! After admiring him for awhile, we snapped a few pictures, got the meat taken care of and were off in search of another prairie goat for Kenny.

We hadn't even gotten off the ranch when we spotted another good buck. This was going to be a little trickier situation as this buck had about 12 does with him as well as a couple of small bucks that seemed to be a constant annoyance to him. We decided we would see if we could use the little topography we had to slip up close enough and downwind of him to try to set up a decoy in hopes of getting his attention and triggering him to at least come within range to investigate. There was almost no cover on top of the knoll we needed to be on except for a cattle water tank, but we felt like we could make

that work easy enough. Once we got to the base of that knoll we split up, Jeremy taking Kenny and Wendy with him to sneak to the tank, myself with the decoy to find a good place to set it up. Once they got set up my plan was to sneak the decoy out in front of the tank and set it, then back off the hill and make my way over to the tank with everyone else. However, what I didn't account for was the ground being extremely compacted from the cattle that frequent the water tank to the point I couldn't get the spikes for the decoy in the ground. I struggled with this for a few seconds when I looked up and saw a pair of black horns trotting directly towards me. Time for plan B.... I quickly laid flat on my stomach with my arms in front of me and a death hold on the decoy legs trying my best to not let it move too much in the wind. I glanced up again, no antelope, so I looked left and saw that Kenny was on the sticks, Jeremy had the camera set and Wendy was looking through the binos, but I couldn't tell if from their position they could see what I was seeing. I quickly glanced forward again and there he was

staring a hole through the decoy. I slowly put my head down, my heart was about to beat out of my chest and all I could do was hope that they could see the buck and knew what was happening and why I was looking like a beached prairie whale holding onto this antelope “kite” downrange. I have no idea what happened in the next 90 or so seconds, all I know is that two different times I heard the bucks’ hoof thuds, once he was so close I could literally feel him walking next to me. I was running all sorts of scenarios through my head as to what was going to happen when he eventually stepped on me which seemed to be a virtual guarantee at that moment. Fortunately though, that never happened, although I later found out that from their point of view and on film it looked like the buck was walking all over me. He finally trotted off and as I lay there listening to the pounding of his hooves on the ground disappear I tried to stay as still as I could, although it took every ounce of me to not jump up and yell, “DID YOU JUST SEE THAT?!”. Then, almost out of nowhere

and much to my surprise, BOOM!!!! THUD!!!!.... I looked up just in time to see the buck disappear over the hill then got to my knees and glanced over to see everyone high fiving! I jumped up and ran over to them, each one of us in pure excitement of what had just happened. I imagine we were all talking about a million miles a minute on the walk over to Kenny’s trophy which turned out to be a great, heavy 78 plus inch buck. I learned that after the buck had all but stepped on me, he trotted back out to get a look at his does stopping about 100 yards in front of me and only 75 yards from the tank. Kenny put one right in the boiler room and he didn’t make it much further than he was when I watched him disappear over the hill after the shot. Say what you will about antelope hunting, but hunts like this are one of the reasons I love getting to spend as much time in the field each year as I do, and why I couldn’t possibly consider a list of favorite hunts without including muzzleloader antelope hunting during the rut!

