

# THE PRONGHORN DANCE

## A TRIAL RUN AT PERSISTENCE HUNTING

It's cold and raining lightly, making this vast sea of grassland turn a shade of burnt yellow beneath the clouded sky. This is definitely not the time to be chasing pronghorn antelope on foot. They're mythically untiring to begin with, and to run one to exhaustion—if it can be done—requires that it be hot... very hot. Nonetheless, the runners who have assembled here show no signs of caring, and they walk slowly through the wet grass trying to find the faint hoof marks of a mature buck that disappeared from sight about 20 minutes ago.

Four of us have gathered here in southern Idaho, in this massive stretch of open country that reaches for hundreds of miles into Nevada and Oregon. Our only human encounters each day are with the fighter jets that race across the sky. They fly so low at times that they see us just as well as we see them, and on one morning a pilot tips his wings in greeting.

Our little tribe out here consists of Brian, Neal, and Baine, who are true runners, and myself, a wannabe runner. In my hasty training I unearthed an old injury, so my days are spent following the runner's trails, or strolling about the hills with camera in hand, flushing up prongies and coyotes now and again.

At night, beneath a rich swath of stars, I quietly work through my prescribed physical therapy exercises, driven by the stories the guys tell me of the day dancing with pronghorn.



**By Casey McFarland**  
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A lovely, dismal day in mid September, Southern Idaho



One of few good tracks we saw during the trip.

Pronghorn are not in fact a true antelope, but to anyone that has seen them, they readily stand apart from any other hooved animals of North America, their colors a wash of grassland-yellow, rust orange, pure white and a splash of deep black. They are, in appearance, an animal fit for the Kalahari. Pronghorn are the last living species of Antilocapridae, and evolved to outrun and outsmart the extinct North American cheetah, dire wolves, wickedly fast (long-legged) hyenas and other beasts whose time has past. These “speed goats”—as the old timers call them—now wander the prairie equipped to outgun any other animal that remains today.

It's fair to say that pronghorn don't necessarily run as much as they fly. When one is all-out tearing across the surface of earth, it spends more time floating above the ground than on it; one of its thin, flexible legs touches down every 29 feet or so. The pronghorn esophagus is massive, like that of a large vacuum cleaner hose, their heart is twice as big as that of a domestic goat of equal size, and they have twice as much blood. Their head is equipped with specialized arteries designed to cool hot blood by flowing through the nasal cavities and ears before making its way to the brain, the organ most vulnerable to overheating in 'endurance races'. A pronghorn can run 60 miles per hour for a long way, and recover in moments to do it again. And they can run 30 mph for, well, forever. Seriously, forever, by

our standards. Oh, and here's something else: at 30 days old, the fawns begin to 'practice' running, making purely joyful 2000 yard loops away from the group... covering 2 miles in 3 minutes.

All of which makes trying a 'persistence hunt' with pronghorn a very peculiar choice. But we're trackers, and hunters, and runners (except for yours truly, Captain Limpy), and most importantly, wildly curious about animals and wildly fond of them. And so we're giving it a shot. This is to be a celebration, really—of life, of earth, of pronghorn and of our own living bodies.

There are many who are fond of the idea that humans evolved to run in large part for the purpose of overtaking animals on foot—wearing them down in hot weather by sheer persistence. I'm not sure about all that, but what we can say is that there are still some folks that do it (bushmen in the Kalahari for instance), and there is evidence that humans all around the globe have or had similar hunting practices where the landscape is fitting. There has even been an upsurge in recent years of runners trying persistence hunts to “prove” our evolutionary history. So far, no luck. None of us here in Idaho care much about proving anything. For us, it's just interesting to try. There's a very real dance happening here, very different than we're used to.





A clump of pronghorn scat, placed atop a buck's scrape in hard clay

Let me address for a moment the hunting element of all this, because it's an important one. Hunting is of course already controversial, but try telling people that may not be so keen on killing that you are heading out to choose one animal and run it over many terrifying or confusing hours to utter exhaustion, and then put a projectile through it... it sounds horrible, doesn't it? I'm by nature already resistant to ending an animal's life and it breaks my heart each time I do it. My partaking in the hunt and the ensuing reflection on heartbreak, gratitude, mortality, and earth is part of my ritual that helps me cope with how confusing Life can be. When I'm hunting I want to offer a death that's immediate and unexpected, and so this idea of running after an animal like a pack of wolves has been foreign to me and hard to wrap my head around.

The clouds begin to break and sunlight cuts through in small patches that race across the grassland. The trail is impossible to follow at any reasonable speed

and we've lost too much time. Besides, this was the third time we'd run this buck and he's grown wise; he's no longer curious about the 3 primates that ran after him for miles in the last two days. He saw us crest the hill this morning and simply vanished—he put on a good burst of speed and flew away. But not all is lost. The runners are learning, as animals do, what seems to work. They set out at an easy jog and I watch them fade into the hills. They'll run until they inevitably jump a group of pronghorn, and when the prongies bolt and crest a hill, one runner will sprint to the top in effort see them before they disappear behind another. The others watch for hand signals and they'll reconvene. When it's time again to sprint, another runner shares the effort. In a day, they may run 18 to 20 miles, with a good 7 or 8 miles of them on a group of pronghorn who are not accustomed to such a thing.

As a witness to all of this, I begin to see something happen. Each day that Neal, Brian, and Baine return from the hills, they are filled with an ever-growing story of Pronghorn. They talk about the straight lines pronghorn prefer, how the females break away from the group, the young bucks who drift in the periphery, the strategies the old males use to throw off pursuers. They talk about how well the prongies see, and how aware they are of being seen. Pronghorn routinely watch for each other, or predators, at a mile and a half or more, and use unnoticeable dips in the topography to disappear astonishingly well on a landscape that looks otherwise flat. They are ghosts in a featureless land.

The guys are absolutely elated. Neal and Brian aren't just good runners, they're great hunters, and they're extremely knowledgeable about wildlife—they've spent their lives pursuing wilderness. They're among the few left who've led lives extremely close to animals, through hunting, wildlife research, and forestry. And yet, they're vibrating in a way I haven't seen. As an educator, I use tracking as a tool for individuals to interact and create relationships with animal lives, and a favorite part of my job is to witness that story taking shape. Trailing or hunting takes another step towards interaction, where we actually meet the animal in space and time. It's all

indeed part of the dance. But this—this is something I've not experienced to the degree I'm seeing. These guys are interacting with animals in an entirely new way, by fully utilizing the capabilities of the human form, using what they're learning from the pronghorn, and putting tracking to use when they need it. They're not running behind pronghorn, they're running with them. It's one hell of a dance, and it's clearly written on their faces.

I'm realizing some things as I observe this pronghorn chase. This persistence hunt. For one, this may, just may, be possible. Given the right terrain, the right substrate, and the right weather, this could actually happen. Secondly, I'm disconfirming a strange narrative that has flashed through my mind about this particular dance, the narrative which I believe most people conjure up when they hear about a hunt like this: humans running viciously after terrified, staggering animals. If there was ever a fair hunt, with a bazillion more opportunities for escape, it's this one. If there was ever a hunt that helped us realize and celebrate our own bodies and the bodies of the ones we've hunted since time began, it's this one.

A curious prongie watches a runner approach...  
and then swiftly runs away.





The young buck taken down by coyotes. How they actually caught him remains a mystery.



When I meet the trio that afternoon, they tell me about the body of young pronghorn buck they pushed a group of coyotes off. He was limp, and his eyes clear—dead for not long. It appeared the 'yotes had rushed down from a small crest of hill and surprised him in his bed, and gotten damn lucky. Or perhaps he was hurt, who knows. We return the following day to have a look. As we near the spot, a group of ravens lifts in a small raucous cloud from his remains. The coyotes had returned, of course, and all that's left is his spine, a few ribs, and his head. Coyote beds, small, round

and twisted in the grass, spot the hillside and overlook countless miles of beautiful country. Brian skins the head, and we talk of life, of death. I think of what it means to hunt, to interact, to dance like this. I've got questions I know I'll never have answers to.

But I know pronghorn a little better now. They cross my mind frequently, snorting at me across the prairie. When my body hurts, I imagine their build, their grace. They make me want to run.

**By Casey McFarland**

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Photo - Neal Wright; Tracker extraordinaire, nealwrightphotography.com

Photo - Casey McFarland

An antelope bed tucked behind a scraggly sagebush.

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