

THE PRONGHORN ANTELOPE

Introduction

The agile pronghorn antelope is a real native American. He is not a true antelope, but instead represents the only member of his family on this continent.

It has been estimated there were 30 to 40 million antelope roaming this country in the early 1800's. Being a creature of the great open spaces, he began to feel the pinch during the westward expansion in the recent 19th century. Killed off in great numbers, less than one thousand remained by 1925. Conservationists then realized something had to be done to save this magnificent animal from extinction. He was saved, and today this true "westerner" is protected and preserved in wildlife refuges and national parks.

Description

No other animal is more strikingly beautiful than the pronghorn antelope when he "poses" out on the open plains. His rich brown coat lightens to almost a creamy white on the under part of the body, the sides of his face, and on the rump patch. The two broad white bands extending across his face contrast to the dark brown, and the black of the mane which spreads forward on each side of the neck. The male "buck" displays a black mask of hair over most of his face. Most striking about the antelope is the rump patch of white hairs which can be lifted to form a rosette of raised hairs much like a gigantic powder puff. These extended hairs actually shine so when the rump patch is "flashed" that it can be seen far across the plains by the other animals of the herd. This "warning" system is used to alert the herd if danger is near.

Large deep set eyes are indicative of the antelope's keen eyesight. In fact, he has been credited with a certain amount of telescopic vision. His hooves are deeply cleft and widely spread, enabling him to run swiftly over uneven surfaces.

Both sexes are relatively small in size, as they stand not more than three feet at the shoulders. The full-grown buck doesn't weigh more than 100 to 120 pounds, and the doe is even smaller.

The unique thing about this animal is his hollow pronged horn for which he has been named. He is the exception to the fact that animals with true horns retain them throughout their entire lives, for he loses his horns each year. They grow over a bony core and are shed in early winter and grow back again by summer. Both bucks and does have horns.

Habits

Antelope are one of the fleetest animals afoot. They can maintain speeds of around 35-miles per hour and can run in spurts up to 70-miles per hour. Sometimes they are seen running and racing for what seems to be the sheer fun of it. Often they play "follow the leader" and many times will seem to challenge passing cars to a race.

Being a very curious animal, they can usually be drawn to within gunshot range by simply waving a cloth, sometimes this results in their death.

He further expresses his curiosity and anxiety with an explosive snort due to a rapid expulsion of air from his nostrils, sounding much like Cha-oo, with the accent on the first syllable and a drawn out oo.

Antelope subsist in arid lands where grass is scarce because they are browsers and actually prefer shrubby plants and many weeds. They like such plants as bitterbrush, saltbrush, sagebrush, and even many weeds which are poisonous to livestock. They only prefer grass in early spring when the young grass shoots are just beginning to appear.

Like many other wild animals, mating takes place in the fall of the year. At that time the bucks will begin to collect their harems, guarding them jealously and fighting off other bucks who threaten by coming too close. After the mating season, when snow begins to appear, the scattered bands converge and they all hunt for the best winter feeding grounds.

Young

In the spring the does drift to kidding areas where the young are born. Twins are common and a single kid is the exception. At birth the kids weigh only five to six pounds. They are pale in color and lack the spots common to the fawns of deer and elk. New born kids have no scent and rely on this characteristic to save them from predators while they are defenceless. The does are very protective of their young and will strike with their sharp hooves at eagles and coyotes which menace them.

Antelope youngsters are very agile within a few days after birth. They can outrun a man when only three days old and the average dog when only six days old. The little fellows grow rapidly and usually weigh about 60 pounds when they are seven months old.

Final Note

In beauty of form and grace of movement few animals can equal the American pronghorn antelope. His contrastingly marked body posed against a clear blue western sky makes him a favorite subject for wildlife photographers. It is a well established fact that the people of America enjoy seeing this splendid fellow, thus, insuring he will be around for future generations to enjoy as well.