LARGE UNGULATES: PRONGHORN

Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*)

Pronghorn, sometimes referred to as pronghorn antelope are not closely related to African antelope species. Pronghorn are the last Antilocaprid species, descendants of pronghorn species from the Pleistocene era (roughly 2.58 million to 11,700 years ago) in North America. Fossils of pronghorn that were prey to the extinct American cheetah species (*Miracinonyx*) have been found in the Rocky Mountains and the southwest. Scientists believe the pronghorn's speed was an evolutionary adaptation to outrun the extinct cats.

Pronghorn Biology

Pronghorn are a shortgrass prairie species. They are the fastest land mammal in North American and mature adults can reach speeds of up to 60 miles per hour and can maintain speeds up to 40 mph for miles. They do not, however prefer to jump but choose to crawl under or sometime through fences.

Pronghorn bucks typically weigh 100-125 pounds and does roughly 70-90 pounds. Bucks are tan with a white underside and rump with unique black and white facial markings, black cheek patches, as well as white bands across the neck and a short mane. Pronghorn does have similar coloring but do not have the black face markings or cheek patches. The pronghorn's legs are very thin with two toes forming sharp pointed hooves. Pronghorn have excellent eyesight and are able to spot potential predators miles away.

Reproduction

The pronghorn are social and often remain in groups of bachelor bucks or does and fawns except for during breeding season when the males compete for breeding. Their breeding season is in September and fawns are born in late May to early June. Pronghorn often give birth to twins, although does may only have one fawn from their first pregnancy. The fawns which are not spotted like the mule deer and elk newborn, hide in the grass until they are able to run with the does. Recruitment of pronghorn can vary based on the region with precipitation being a common factor; at Vermejo recruitment can range from in the teens to above 40%. Recruitment can be low during drought years when there is not enough hiding cover available. Predation can be a limiting factor in recruitment with many fawns killed by predators including coyote, bobcat, and golden eagles. Recent studies at Vermejo have found that adults become prey to mountain lions.

Horns

Pronghorn bucks have horns, not antlers. However, the bucks shed the sheath that covers the keratin inner horn every year. The sheath, made from a stiff hair-like material, regrows and offers protection to the inner horn. The pronghorn are the only species to shed a horn sheath annually. The horns have a prong that forks from the front of the horn giving them their name. Does, unlike female deer species, also have horns but they are much shorter. Perhaps this is why another nickname for the species is a 'speedgoat' from capra, the latin word meaning goat.

Diet

The diet of pronghorn is mostly forbs (flowering plants) with some shrubs, grasses, cacti and even lichen. Key plants for pronghorn include fringed sage, asters, wheatgrass and scarlet globe mallow. In winter, pronghorn will browse shrubs as forbs are not always available. They are most likely to add a little grass to their diet in the summer when the grass is green. Pronghorn coexist well with bison on the prairie as the bison are predominantly grass eaters and some scientists believe that bison and pronghorn once had a symbiotic

relationship on the prairie with their grazing habits aiding each other. The pronghorn will also eat disturbance species forbs that grow in and around the black-tailed prairie dog colonies, and if populations are in balance, the pronghorn keep the forbs in check, eventually allowing grasses to reestablish.

Population

Pronghorn populations can be affected by Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease or EHD and also Bluetongue Virus. The pronghorn population in northeastern New Mexico appears to be relatively stable. Vermejo biologists conduct a pronghorn survey each August to track trends in not only the number of animals, but also in the buck to doe ratios as well as recruitment or fawn survival.

Woodland Pronghorn

During the early 2000's through 2012, northeast New Mexico experienced severe drought conditions. Towards the end of the drought cycle, a small group of pronghorn moved upland, likely in search of food. This group settled in Castle Rock Park, a broad montane grassland at roughly 8600 feet in elevation. Precipitation has cycled back to a more normal pattern but the pronghorn have remained, and the population has expanded in numbers. It is now common to see pronghorn in Castle Rock and Van Bremmer Parks, Van Bremmer Canyon, and even in Vermejo Park near headquarters. Pronghorn have also been observed in the Middle Canadian. The pronghorn have learned to navigate through the adjacent ponderosa pine forests over the last 10-12 years, a remarkable adaptation in a short time period. It seems like the pronghorn are one of the more resilient species that are already moving up in elevation in response to changes in climatic conditions. For now, they are referred to as Vermejo's woodland pronghorn.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. **How fast can a pronghorn run?** Pronghorn can reach speeds up to 60 miles an hour. They are the fastest land animal in North America.
2. **Interesting fact**: Pronghorn do not have dew claws on their hooves like deer and elk.
3. **Do Vermejo's pronghorn migrate seasonally?** No, the pronghorn do not move significantly during different seasons, unlike pronghorn in areas like Wyoming where they undergo very long migrations.