

PRONGHORN



Have you seen a pronghorn in Idaho? If you did, you were most likely not in the northern part of our state. Pronghorns are animals that like wide open spaces.

They are usually found on grasslands and shrubby areas where the plants don't get much over two feet high. Pronghorns love the sagebrush in southern Idaho. This is their main source of food in the winter. In the summer, they will also eat soft stemmed plants, like wildflowers. They don't like to eat much grass.

You may also hear people call pronghorn antelope. Pronghorns may look like the antelope that roam the African plains, but they are really very different animals. Pronghorns are in the family Antilocapridae (an-til-o-CAP-ri-day). They are the only member of this family. They have no close relatives.

Pronghorns are beautiful animals. Their upper bodies are pale tan to reddish tan. Their sides, bellies, insides of the legs, and rump are white. They have two broad white bands across their throats. Both the males and females have horns, but the females' horns are short; they are about four inches long. The males' horns are longer, being 12 to 20 inches long. They also have a forward pointing, short branch called a "prong." This is where the name pronghorn came from. The males also have a black band on the snout and black neck patch that the females do not have. Pronghorns are small compared to other hoofed animals. The males weigh between 90 to 140 pounds; females weigh between 75 to 105 pounds.

Pronghorns are the fastest animals in North America. They can run 45 miles-per-hour over a long period of time! That doesn't mean they don't have predators though. Coyotes eat more pronghorns than any other animal. Bobcats are also predators that might catch a young pronghorn.

Catching a healthy adult pronghorn is no easy feat. They have excellent hearing and a good sense of smell. But their eyesight is amazing! A pronghorn's eyeball is about one and one-half inches in diameter. That's the size of a horse's eye! Pronghorns can see something moving when it is up to four miles away! You might say they have built-in binoculars. Although pronghorns can detect a moving object miles away, they may ignore a person standing still just fifty feet away. Something needs to move for a pronghorn to see it.

When pronghorns spot danger, they have a way to warn other pronghorns. They stick up the white hairs on their rumps. On a bright day, the signal may be seen for miles. This is a cue for other pronghorns to do what they do best - run.

Keep an eye out for pronghorns. They have been known to be playful at times. Pronghorns have even raced vehicles driving on roads through their habitat.

Growing Up Pronghorn

Doe



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Buck



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Pronghorn does (females) might have their first baby (fawn) when they are about one and one-half years old. Bucks (males) are usually around three years old before they breed.

In mid-summer, breeding males stake out territories. They mark their territories by rubbing scent glands found on the sides of their necks on plants and by making loud snorts. They will also paw at the ground to tell other males to stay away. They will defend their territories from all other males, but females can travel between the males' territories freely. At this time, the bucks start to gather groups, or harems, of females. One buck might have as many as 20 does in his harem. In late summer and early fall, bucks start to show-off for the does. They have mock battles. Sometimes bucks even challenge an imaginary rival!

A doe is pregnant for about 250 days. The young pronghorns are born in May or June. The first time a doe has a baby she will probably have one fawn, but after that she usually will have twins.

Newborn pronghorns weigh about as much as a human baby - between five to nine pounds. Fawns have a gray coat until they are about three months old. The gray coat helps the fawns camouflage, or hide, from danger. They have no odor and will lie motionless for hours while their mothers are away eating. The does will return to

nurse their young three or four times a day. Fawns are nibbling on plants when they are about a week old. They are weaned at about four months of age.

Pronghorn fawns are most vulnerable during their first two months of life. At this young age, pronghorn can run, but not as quickly as adults. Once they get past this risky stage of life, a pronghorn might live to be 15 years old.

Fawn



© Jason Beck

If a pronghorn and a cheetah were in a race, which animal would win? The cheetah is a faster sprinter. It would win in a short-distance race, but the pronghorn would win a long-distance race. It would still be going long after the cheetah stopped.

Pronghorns' bodies are made for speed and endurance. Their hearts, lungs, and the tubes that carry oxygen to their lungs are two to four times larger than a similar sized animal, like a goat. Their blood has lots of hemoglobin (HEE-mo-glow-bin) in it. Hemoglobin is what makes your blood red. Oxygen binds to hemoglobin and the hemoglobin carries the oxygen to the muscles. The more hemoglobin an animal has the more oxygen it can carry to its muscles and the faster its muscles can work. The muscles are also packed with many mitochondria (my- toe-KON-dree-a). Mitochondria are like power plants. They turn food into energy, so the more mitochondria a muscle has the faster it can work. Pronghorn also have thick leg bones; they are twice as thick as a cow's leg bone. Those thick bones let pronghorns run over rough land without breaking their legs.

Built for *Speed*

All these adaptations allow pronghorns to be the fastest mammal in North America. They have bursts of speed that are greater than 60 miles-per-hour, and they can sustain speeds of 30 to 45 miles-per-hour over long distances. Some people wonder why a pronghorn would need to run so fast. After all, cheetahs don't live in North America. Well, they once did! Ancient pronghorns were hunted by cheetahs! Saber-toothed cats, lions and the American cheetah once roamed North America. The pronghorn would have been a tasty treat for those big cats. Pronghorns that were slow were eaten. Those that ran quickly got away. Nature selected fast pronghorns. American cheetahs may be extinct, but pronghorns are still here with their bodies built for speed.



Pronghorns in History

Pronghorn fossils have been found in North America that are over one million years old. At one time, they were more common than bison. Scientists think that the pronghorn once numbered about 40 million! They were the most common animal on the American plain.

Native Americans knew about pronghorns hundreds of years ago. They hunted them, but no other people had seen them. Members of Coronado's Spanish expedition into the southwest were the first outsiders to see pronghorns. Three hundred years later, Lewis and Clark officially "discovered" and described pronghorns for science. William Clark shot the first pronghorn on September 14, 1804 in South Dakota. Clark compared the look of the pronghorn to that of a sheep or antelope but called it a "goat." Meriwether Lewis called it an "antelope" - a name still popular today.

Explorers and settlers killed pronghorns for meat and sport. As the west was settled, pronghorns were pushed out by towns, cattle, fields and roads. Fences may be a pronghorn's worst enemy. A pronghorn will starve to death before it will jump a fence. In 1908, only 20,000 were left.

People noticed that pronghorns needed some help. Pronghorns found shelter in early national parks and wildlife refuges. Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge was formed in Oregon on September 6, 1935. It is now called the Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. One year later Nevada gave pronghorns a safe place to roam in the Charles Sheldon Antelope range. These places gave pronghorns the space and freedom to roam that they needed.

Today pronghorns are doing well. They can be hunted in many states, including Idaho. With people looking out for them, pronghorns should continue to roam the west.



Ungu-What?

Pronghorns are ungulates (UN-gyu-lits). Ungulate is the Latin word for hoof. All ungulates have hooves.

Scientists used to group all ungulates together, but now they are divided into two groups. One group includes animals that have an odd number of toes. Horses are in this group. Animals in the other group have an even number of toes. Which group do you think pronghorn are in?

All ungulates are herbivores. They eat plants. Grasses, leaves and twigs are tough to eat. To help them digest plants, ungulates have stomachs divided into four different chambers or rooms.

When pronghorns eat, they nip off leaves from shrubs. They don't chew their food much before swallowing it. The leaves go into the first chamber of their stomachs. The first chamber is full of bacteria and other organisms that help break down the plants. Later, pronghorns spit up the food and chew it again. Have you ever heard of cows chewing their cud? They are chewing food regurgitated from their stomachs.

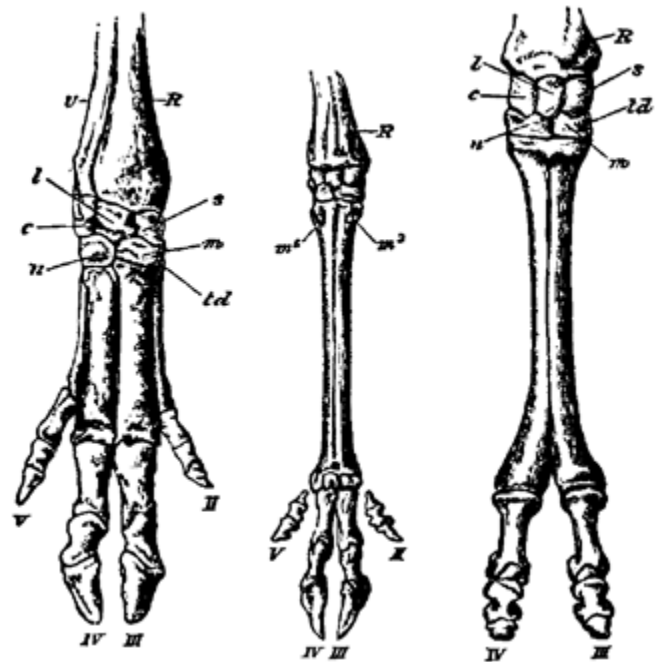
Once chewed, the food passes into the second and third parts of their stomachs where water is taken out of the food. The fourth chamber of their stomachs is the one that is most like your stomach. It absorbs the nutrients out of the food.

Having a stomach with many chambers not only allows animals to eat tough plants, it also helps to keep them safe. Many animals are at risk when they eat. Predators are more likely to see a deer eating in a clearing than hiding under a tree, so deer eat quickly. They nip off plants, chew them just a little and then swallow them. Once their first stomach is full, the deer finds a place to rest and hide. Now the deer can fully chew and digest their food, without having to constantly look out for danger. Don't ungulates have some amazing adaptations?



White-tailed deer

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From left to right: pig, red deer, and camel.

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Humongous Horns



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Pronghorn, mountain goats, bison and bighorn sheep have horns. Horns are a bit different than antlers. Horns have two parts, a boney middle and an outer sheath. The inside part is bone that is attached to the skull. The outside of the horn, the sheath, is a covering made of a tough fiber-like material called keratin. Your fingernails and hair also contain keratin. What purpose does the sheath serve? It protects what's underneath!

Horns are permanent. In most cases, they continue to grow throughout an animal's life. Pronghorns are an exception to this rule. A pronghorn will shed and re-grow its sheath each year.

If you take a close look at most horns, you may see rings. A mountain goat's horns have rings around them. Counting the rings will tell you the age of the goat. Rings are formed each year after the goat is one year old, so the horns of a mountain goat will have one less ring than its age.

How do you tell horns and antlers apart from each other? Antlers often look like tree branches with a main beam and points coming off of the beam. Horns are usually not branched like antlers; they are shaped similar to the letters "C," "J," and "L." One animal in Idaho has "C" shaped horns. It is found living on rocky cliffs. Can you guess which animal it is?

Awesome Antlers

Antlers grow on members of the deer family. They are bones that grow out of the animal's skull. An antler grows faster than any other kind of bone. It can grow up to one inch a day during the summer! Usually only the males grow antlers, but female caribou can grow antlers. There is even a species of deer where neither the male nor female grow antlers—the Chinese water deer.

Antlers are light and easily damaged until late summer. At this time, they are covered with a thin skin called velvet. Velvet is covered with fine, short hairs and contains thousands of blood vessels. The blood vessels carry calcium and minerals needed for building strong bones. If an elk damages his antlers badly at this point, he could actually bleed to death! Once the antlers have grown, the blood vessels in the velvet close off. The velvet dries up and starts to fall off. By October or September, the velvet has been completely rubbed off by the elk, and the antlers are hard and polished. Elk shed their antlers in early winter and then immediately begin to grow another set.

Antlers are most often used to settle differences about territory, strength and to win mates. An elk that has a large set of antlers is likely to be strong and healthy. He would be regarded highly by other elk.



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