

Nature Note

Pronghorns



Interior

One of the fleetest animals in the New World, the pronghorn is also one of the rarest.

This graceful white and chestnut animal with unique black pronged horns is also the only hooved mammal that originated here on the North American continent. Other hooved animals such as the elk and deer migrated to this country in prehistoric times across the land bridge of the Bering Strait, or, as in the case of the horse, were brought here by man.

Actually, the pronghorned antelope, is not an antelope, even though it resembles one. It shows certain traits of deer and cattle.

The distinct horns of the pronghorn, rising vertically above the eyes, are hollow and composed of a bony core covered with a sheath of fused hairs that are shed each autumn after

the breeding season. A new sheath grows upward under the old sheath. Another peculiar trait of the pronghorn is the long white hair on their buttocks. By erecting these hairs in the sunlight, these animals can flash brilliant white signals of danger to other members as far away as several miles.

Once the pronghorns populated the western plains of North America in great numbers—as many as 40 million, wildlife experts estimate. In the days before Indians had horses to ride, only a few of the fleet-footers were killed; even after the arrival of the horse, they often could outdistance their pursuers, running as fast as 40 miles per hour. But increasing numbers of armed population, plus their own innate curiosity that drives them closer to inspect even a hunter, brought them down by the thousands. By 1910 their bands were so small and scattered that only emergency protective measures spared them from becoming extinct. Today, careful conservation practices have managed to increase their numbers.

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