Irene Fork & Journal Sept 26-44

4 negatives

PRONGHORN, SWIFTEST ANIMAL OF THE DESERT

by

Irene Finley
Photographs by William L. Finley

On a chill spring morning the half-hearted sun lighted the frosty blades of the sca nt grass and the rounded clumps of sagebrush that spread far and away across the desert valley below Hart Mountain. It was dead still and it seemed as if nothing alive existed in this barren land that went on and on beyond the reach of the eye. We were hunting for something, and we knew it was out there in that deceptive waste. Slowly and persistently our eyes swung back and forth like search-lights boring into the unresponsive scene, halting on some slight difference in tone or imagined form, almost compelling it to happen. And it did. Something moved, now seen, now gone. Minutes passed until the silence was oppressive, and the eyes ached with strain. It came again, a glint on something tawny moving slowly in the sea of sagebrush.

A doe antelope was grazing liesurely, stopping now and then to nibble. But there was method in her movements. Her mind was not on her breakfast. She was moving in a circle, and long before we came anywhere near, we knew that she was aware of us. Feigning indifference and some phantom cloak of concealment, she contunued her grazing, but she was methodically widening her circle. As we approached, we realized that she was leading us off from her original feeding spot. We back-tracked a little and began a narrowing circle, searching under every sagebrush.

Instantly she changed her tactics and gave up the farce of fooling us. She threw up her head and bounded off with that rubber ball mechanism of her tribe. Seeing that we did not fall for this trick, she turned and came ba ck a little way, nervously snipped a bite of sage, but her eye was on us. As we closed in meand ering around to a center, she showed anxiety, came closer, stamped her feet and snorted, then trotted

off again. At least, we knew that we were getting warm. For a good hour we went around and around until we almost knew the number of every bush and the look of it. No, we didn't miss a bush, but we did miss our game. We were ready to give it up and were standing debating whether to go back to camp. My eyes roamed aimlessly, finally rested unseeing on a bush not far away. My mind wass off the job, gone wool gathering. I stood with a fixed state on the bush and the queer, twisted jumble of some dead branches underneath. All at once a picture began to appear, dim at first and half formed, until soon it almost jumped at me, a colorless kid under a colorless bush. It lay as if dead, eyes closed, thin body, and long knock-kneed legs folded up.

I stooped to pick it up when with a bound it slipped from under my fingers and was away like the wind after its mother, bouncing along, twisting between bushes, a faint bleat coming back to us. We took after it, sprinting at top speed. Man's top speed is earth bound compared to the whirlwind gait of the pronghorn. But Man's puffing perseverance proved too much for an infant and we finally overtook him. He dropped, sprawled and lifeless again under a bush. He had a rather long face, black nose and black line over the head, big scooped ears and large dark eyes, a coat of stiff bristly hair. When he condescended to revive and become one of us, he proved to be a tractable and lovable baby, nuzzling a face and licking off salty perspiration.

The antelope or pronghorn is native to America with no real relatives anywhere in the world. It is hardy in its own habitat, not ea sy to raise in captivity. It is difficult for this high-strung, delicate animal to thrive even on the large fenced areas, as it needs the freedom of the open range and the dry, sandy desert. An antelope kept in captivity for any length of time in wet western Oregon might be likely to develop foot rot and not live very long. In size the pronghorn is about that of a small deer, weighing perhaps 140 pounds. The doe weighs slightly less that that of a buck. Both sexes have horns, hollow over a bony core,

and are shed every year in the late fall. The prong of the buck extends directly over the eye. The doe has shorter, slender horns with no prong. It is protectively colored in tawny brown and tan to fit into the dry desert, the nose, horns, spots on the neck, and a splash below the ear being black. The udder parts are grayish turning to white in winter, and the rump patches are also white. When frightened and running away, these paches flare out and flash a warning signal to other pronghorns in the vicinity.

Racing in an auto a small bunch of antelope around dry, bumpy Spanish Lake in ea stern Oregon, the animals kept ahead of us at forty-five miles an hour. Tht does tired out soon, but a big buck bounded on in leaps of over eighteen feet. He finally whirled off into the jumbled rocks, stood on a high point and looked ba ck at us as if daring us to run our synthetic legs up there. Anyway, it was a thrilling gamble, the driver of the clumsy Packard tense and leaning forward, I refilling cameras, the photographer shooting out of a window. The antelope had the last laugh.

The pronghorn has methods of its own for protecting itself and its young from traditional enemies, worst of which and ever present in the same desert regions of sand and sage, chalk cliffs and dwindling water holes, is that sneaking yellow shadow, the coyote, a fellow of keen wits and debased morals. The young of the antelope are supposed to have no body odor to attract hunting predators, but depend upon "freezing" under bushes and fading into the desert debris. But the foxy coyote has more than nose to hunt with and eyes to see with. He can almost feel a toothsome kid under a bush, and he can watch the movements of a doe mother and interpret what is in her mind as if she was think ing out loud. He is also hungry enough and bold enough to match his wits against hers. Many times he wins, but once in a while retreat is better than bravery. A mother is fast and furious when her young is atta cked. She will flash and twist and cut in on his oily efforts, sla shing at him with her sharp edged front feet. Usually discretion saves his life. But even so many antelope fawns fall prey to prowling coyotes.

The story of the pronghorn is like that of others of our fauna of America. Vying with the buffalo, herds of antelope roamed our grama grass prairies of the West a century or two ago. It was a guileless animal, often betrayed to its destruction by its own curiosity and temerity. Anything unusual in form or color and not going off like a bursting bomb would finally catch the eye of an antelope, especially an itching buck, and soon a telephonic message would silently assemble an inquisitive a udience edging closer a little at a time to solve the mystery. The old trick of tying a white cloth to a stick stuck up in a bush, and then lying in wait has furnished many early settlers with fre sh meat for some time.

In the face of growing population, the fencing of the prairies, and modern firearms, it is not so many years ago that the antelope had been depleted to the danger point. Federal refuges and stricter protective laws have given him a lease on life. In 1924, The Biological Survey estimated that pronghorn numbers had fallen to a dangerous degree numbering 26,000 in the seventeen western states. In 1939, fifteen years later, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced an increase up to 165,000. It might be a natural cycle, for these ebb and flow periods happen in the lives of wild animals. But how long will this respite last with fast growing nations, the indifference of a time of world war ravaging the farthest corners, and the age of man and not animals in full swing?