



HUNTING THE PRONG BUCK

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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In the wide plains where the prong-buck dwells the hunter must sometimes face thirst, as well as fire and frost. The only time I ever really suffered from thirst was while hunting prong-buck.

It was late in the summer, I was with the ranch wagon on the way to join a round-up, and as we were out of meat I started for a day's hunt.

After two or three hours' ride, up winding coulees, and through the scorched desolation of patches of Bad Lands, I reached the rolling prairie. The heat and drought had long burned the short grass dull brown; the bottoms of what had been pools were covered with hard, dry, cracked earth. The day was cloudless, and the heat oppressive. There were many antelope, but I got only one shot, breaking a buck's leg; and though I followed it for a couple of hours I could not overtake it. By this time it was late in the afternoon, and I was far away from the river; so I pushed for a creek, in the bed of which I had always found pools of water, especially towards the head, as is usual with plains watercourses. To my chagrin, however, they all proved to be dry; and though I rode up the creek bed toward the head, carefully searching for any sign of water, night closed on me before I found any. For two or three hours I stumbled on, leading my horse, in my fruitless search; then a tumble over a cut bank in the dark warned me that I might as well stay where I was for the rest of the warm night. Accordingly I unsaddled the horse, and tied him to a sage brush; after while he began to feed on the dewy grass. At first I was too thirsty to sleep. Finally I fell into a slumber, and when I awoke at dawn I felt no thirst. For an hour or two more I continued my search for water in the creek bed; then abandoned it and rode straight for the river. By the time we reached it my thirst had come back with redoubled force, my mouth was parched, and the horse was in quite as bad a plight; it seemed as if we could neither of us ever drink our fill of the tepid, rather muddy water. Of course this experience was merely unpleasant; thirst is not a source of real danger in the plains country proper, whereas in the hideous deserts that extend from southern Idaho through Utah and Nevada to Arizona, it ever menaces with death the hunter and explorer.

In the plains the weather is apt to be in extremes; the heat is tropical, the cold arctic, and the droughts are relieved by furious floods. These are generally more severe and lasting in the spring, after the melting of the snow; and fierce local freshets follow the occasional cloudbursts. The large rivers then become wholly impassable, and even the smaller are formidable obstacles. It is not easy to get cattle across a swollen stream, where the current runs like a turbid mill-race over the bed of shifting quicksand. Once five of us took a thousand head of trail steers across the Little Missouri when the river was up, and it was no light task. The muddy current was boiling past the banks covered with driftwood and foul yellow froth, and the frightened cattle shrank from entering it. At last, by hard riding, with much loud shouting and swinging of ropes, we got the leaders in, and the whole herd followed. After them we went in our turn, the horses swimming at one moment, and the next staggering and floundering through the quicksand. I was riding my pet cutting horse, Muley, which has the provoking habit of making great bonnds where the water is just not deep enough for swimming; once he almost unsaddled me. Some of the cattle were caught by the currents and rolled over and over; most of these were able, with the help of our ropes, to put on their feet again; only one was drowned, or rather choked in a quicksand. Many swam down stream, and in consequence struck a difficult landing, where the river ran under a cut bank; these we had to haul out with our ropes.

Although I have often had a horse down in quicksand or in crossing a swollen river, and have had to work hard to save him, I have never myself lost one under such circumstances. Yet once I saw the horse of one of my men drown under him directly in front of the ranch house, while he was trying to cross the river. This was in early spring, soon after the ice had broken.

When making long wagon trips over the great plains, antelope often offer the only source of meat supply, save for occasional water fowl, sage fowl, and prairie fowl—the sharp-tailed prairie fowl, he it understood. This is the characteristic ground of the cat country; the true prairie fowl is a bird of the farming land farther east.

Towards the end of the summer of '92 I found it necessary to travel from my ranch to the Black Hills, some two hundred miles south. The ranch wagon went with me, driven by an all-round plainsman, a man of iron nerves and varied past, the sheriff of our county. He was an old friend of mine; at one time I had served as deputy-sheriff for the northern end of the county. In the wagon we carried our food and camp kit, and our three rolls of bedding, each wrapped in a thick, nearly waterproof canvas sheet; we had a tent, but we never needed it. The load being light, the wagon was drawn by but a span of horses, a pair of wild runaways, tough, and good travelers. My foreman and I rode beside the wagon on our wiry, unkempt, unshod cattle-ponies. They carried us all day at a rack, pace, single-foot or slow lope, varied by rapid gal-

loping when we made long circles after game; the trot, the favorite gait with eastern park-riders, is disliked by all peoples who have to do much of their life-work in the saddle.

The first day's ride was not attractive. The heat was intense and the dust stifling, as we had to drive some loose horses for the first few miles, and afterwards to ride up and down the sandy river bed, where the cattle had gathered, to look over some young steers we had put on the range the preceding spring. When we did camp it was by a pool of stagnant water, in a creek bottom, and the mosquitoes were a torment. Nevertheless, as evening fell, it was pleasant to climb a little knoll nearby and gaze at the rows of strangely colored buttes, grass-clad, or of bare earth and scoria, their soft reds and purples showing as through a haze, and their irregular outlines gradually losing their sharpness in the fading twilight.

My foreman and I usually rode far off to one side of the wagon, looking out for antelope. Of these we at first saw few, but they grew more plentiful as we journeyed onward, approaching a big, scantily wooded creek, where I had found the prong-horn abundant in previous seasons. They were very wary and watchful whether going singly or in small parties, and the lay of the land made it exceedingly difficult to get within range. The last time I had hunted in this neighborhood was in the fall, at the height of the rutting season. Prong-bucks, even more than other game, seem fairly maddened by erotic excitement. At the time of my former hunt they were in ceaseless motion; each master buck being incessantly occupied in herding his harem, and fighting would-be rivals, while single bucks chased single does as grayhounds chase hares, or else, if no does were in sight, from sheer excitement ran to and fro as if crazy, racing at full speed in one direction, then halting, wheeling, and tearing back again just as hard as they could go.

At this time, however, the rut was still some weeks off, and all the bucks had to do was to feed and keep a lookout for enemies. Try my best, I could not get within less than four or five hundred yards, and though I took a number of shots at these, or even longer distances, I missed. If a man is out merely for a day's hunt, and has

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on a smooth spot beside the wagon; the horses were watered and tethered to picket pins where the feed was best; water was fetched from the spring; a deep hole was dug for the fire, and the grass roundabout carefully burned off; and in a few moments the bread was baking in the Dutch oven, the potatoes were boiling, antelope steaks were sizzling in the frying-pan, and the kettle was ready for the tea. After supper, eaten with the relish known well to every hard-working and successful hunter, we sat for half an hour or so round the fire, and then turned in under the blankets and listened to the wailing of the coyotes until we fell sound asleep.

We determined to stay in this camp all day, so as to try and kill another prong-buck, as we would soon be past the good hunting grounds. I did not have to go far for my game next morning, for soon after breakfast, while sitting on my canvas bag cleaning my rifle, the sheriff suddenly called to me that a bunch of antelope were coming towards us. Sure enough there they were, four in number, rather over half a mile off, on the first bench of the prairie, two or three hundred yards back of the creek, leisurely feeding in our direction. In a minute or two they were out of sight, and I instantly ran along the creek towards them for a quarter of a mile, and then crawled up a short shallow coule, close to the head of which they seemed likely to pass. When nearly at the end I cautiously raised my hatless head, peered through some straggling weeds, and at once saw the horns of the buck. He was a big fellow, about a hundred and twenty yards off; the others, a doe and two kids, were in front. As I lifted myself on my elbows he halted and turned his raised head towards me; the sunlight shone bright on his supple, vigorous body with its markings of sharply contrasted brown and white. I pulled trigger, and away he went; but I could see that his race was nearly run, and he fell after going a few hundred yards.

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Throwing the buck into the wagon we continued our journey across the prairie, no longer following any road, and before sunset jolted down towards the big creek for which we had been heading. There were many water-holes therein, and timber of considerable size; box alder and ash grew here and there in clumps and fringes, beside the serpentine curves of the nearly dry torrent bed, the growth being thickest under the shelter of the occasional low bluffs. We drove down to a heavily grassed bottom, near a deep, narrow pool, with, at one end, that rarest of luxuries in the plains country, a bubbling spring of pure, cold water. With plenty of wood, delicious water, ample feed for the horses, and fresh meat we had every comfort and luxury incident to camp life in good weather. The bedding was tossed out



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on a smooth spot beside the wagon; the horses were watered and tethered to picket pins where the feed was best; water was fetched from the spring; a deep hole was dug for the fire, and the grass roundabout carefully burned off; and in a few moments the bread was baking in the Dutch oven, the potatoes were boiling, antelope steaks were sizzling in the frying-pan, and the kettle was ready for the tea. After supper, eaten with the relish known well to every hard-working and successful hunter, we sat for half an hour or so round the fire, and then turned in under the blankets and listened to the wailing of the coyotes until we fell sound asleep.

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I had thus bagged one prong-buck, as the net outcome of the expenditure of fourteen cartridges. This was certainly not good shooting; but neither was it as bad as it would seem to the man inexperienced in antelope hunting. When fresh meat is urgently needed, and when time is too short, the hunter who is after antelope in an open flat country must risk many long shots. In no other kind of hunting is there so much long-distance shooting.

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