

THE WILD SIDE by Dave Gibson

THE PRONGHORN



The last remaining species of its biological family, pronghorns (sometimes called pronghorn antelope) are only found in Western North America. The fastest land mammal of the New World, reaching speeds of seventy miles an hour, it far outpaces any of its would-be predators and may have developed the special talent in ancient times when cheetahs inhabited the landscape. Discovered by western science in 1804 during the Lewis and Clark Expedition, William Clark wrote: *"In my walk I Killed a Buck Goat [antelope] of this Countrey... his Norstrals large, his eyes like a Sheep he is more like the Antilope or Gazella of Africa than other Species of Goat."*

Pale-tan to reddish-tan with white under-parts, throat bands, jaw, cheeks, and rump, males also are colored black from between their eyes extending

to the nose and below the ear. Bucks, making soft vocalizations (sweet talk), will sway their heads from side to side displaying their dark neck patches while courting. Relying on flight and able to spot trouble from four miles away, pronghorns will use their sharp hooves to defend themselves if ambushed and are capable of driving off a coyote. Their ebony lyre-shaped horns have a permanent bone core and can attain twenty inches in length. Its forward-facing namesake "prong" is no longer than four inches and about halfway up its horn. The keratinous sheath is shed every fall and re-grown.

It is estimated that there were 35 million pronghorns alive at the beginning of the 19th century. With the fencing of rangeland disturbing migration corridors, and over-hunting, the pronghorns' fate paralleled that of the buffalo. By 1915 there were only thirteen thousand pronghorn in existence. Through relocation programs and hunting restrictions, today there are about 1.3 million. It is thought that in Wyoming there are as many pronghorns as people!

*Dave Gibson is a photographer & writer focusing on the natural world around us.
His imagery and previous articles can be found on his web site at www.davegibsonimages.com*