

GUN NOTES



By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

PRONGHORNS

Continued from last month

■ Antelope killed up on the high mesas and high ridges at 7,000 to 10,000 feet, where they live on the fine buffalo and bunch grass, are almost as fine eating as sheep—a little drier meat, but wonderfully well flavored. If you go after antelope like a man, you will find some of the finest sport, and one of the finest stalking animals, on this continent. But if you shoot them from an auto, little sport or knowledge will be obtained.



Antelope have wonderful eyes but never the equal of mountain sheep. They can see you for miles, but do not seem to be able to tell exactly what you are, as a mountain sheep will do. They seldom take alarm at extreme distances as will mountain sheep. Further, if horses or cattle graze in the same range, antelope will often be found associating and feeding with them, seemingly enjoying their companionship. Thus a saddle horse can usually be ridden fairly close to antelope without exciting them. When alarmed, an antelope will usually raise its head very erect and stare at you. The entire rump patch will stand on end, giving the little beast a most curious appearance, then he will probably stamp a



foot and bark at you, before taking off. Sometimes they will continue to stand and stamp and bark for several seconds before jumping, usually into a stiff-legged long stride trot, with head very erect, then breaking quickly into a run. When really scared, they run flat with the ground with head well extended in front of them, the same as a race horse, and do not really get

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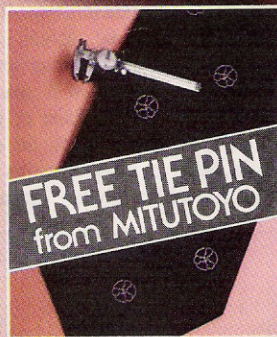
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GUNNOTES

continued from page 11

wound up and into high gear until they have run a mile or so and have their mouths open and their tongue hanging out. Then they can really fly. As long as their heads are held high they are not really running at all.

Buster and Vern Coiner and I once wanted to see how long were the horns carried by a particularly large buck that ran with a band of about a hundred animals on a sage flat on the Pahsimeroi. It was long before the season and we had no intention of harming the animals, but we wanted to see the length of that old boy's horns at close range. In the Chevrolet we chased them for a good six miles over more or less broken ground, then after negotiating a bad wash we thought we had them, and in second gear we were doing over 30 miles an hour and fast closing. Then they simply let out another notch and ran right around and across our front as though we were standing still. I still do not know how fast they can actually run. The old buck was a very large and fat animal and ran well to the rear of the band. The tops of his horns rose straight up, so I knew he would not go over 14 or 15 inches and lost interest in him for the season.

The bark of an antelope buck is a peculiar sound, like nothing else I know of. It's a sort of nasal snort, but sounds very much like the cawing of a crow, only more of an explosive nasal twang, in some ways resembling the bark of a small dog. It can be heard for a considerable distance, and while of the same nasal type as the whistle of a buck deer, has more tone to it and more resembles the crow. Buck antelope are beautiful, dainty little beasts, proud as peacocks, and seem to take great pride in carefully oiling their hair and polishing their horns on sagebushes before the rut starts. No doubt they are our fastest game animals.

Antelope were formerly plains animals, staying out on the open flats, but today, in many sections, they have turned into mountain animals and now range where mountain sheep did in former years, before scabies killed them off. I have even jumped several antelope that were bedded in dense timber. At other times during our season here I have sat on a high open ridge and watched the dust trails all over the valley floor, as hunters stirred up and shot at band after band. Many of those antelope headed straight for the mountains and showed no hesitation in climbing up through a half mile of dense fir timber to reach the open mesa-like tops of the mountains and ridges. I have even seen old solitary bucks bedded in the slide-rock, right under the highest cliffs, where one would never expect anything but sheep or goats. This shows what civilization and the ultimate change in environment have done to the antelope's habits. The elk also used to be a plains animal, but is now a mountain



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animal. Antelope are supposed never to jump washes or fences. I have seen them jump narrow washes many times and last winter when the Idaho Game Department rounded up several bands with an airplane for shipment to other sections of the state, some few antelope actually jumped an eight-foot canvas fence set up to corral them. I believe that changes in habitat have driven them to be more of a mountain than a plains animal, at least in this section.

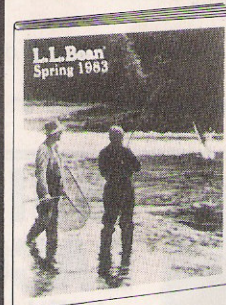
The rut starts early in September and the fawns are born in May or early June, nearly always two in number. I have never seen triplets as I have with both whitetail and mule deer, but they may occur. The old doe usually selects her fawning ground with care and quite often another doe will take up her claim a short distance away, in sight of the first doe. If many antelope are present, this fawning ground may be quite extensive. I believe it is done for mutual protection, by one doe warning the next of the approach of any enemies. Coyotes and golden eagles are their worst enemies. In late winter, coyotes may occasionally run antelope into deep crusted snow and eat them alive, as the sage wolves can travel easily on top of the crust. At fawning time a single coyote has little chance of obtaining a fawn as the does are very watchful and will attack a coyote without hesitation, usually striking at him with the forefeet if they can make him run. If he starts to run they will chase him and administer a sound

drubbing with those forefeet, usually chasing him for a quarter mile from their fawns. Then some other doe may take up the task if any be present. When two coyotes work together they have more luck, and one may attract the doe's attention and endeavor to lure her away from the fawns while its mate makes a kill. Doe antelope are very canny, however, and will usually spot both coyotes and stick closer to the fawns' bed ground. The little fellows, all legs and innocence, are usually hidden in the sage, and except for the soaring old golden eagle are hard to find. But that great bird does get a lot of them. The golden eagle is also perfectly capable of breaking the back of mature antelope and often does so when rabbits are scarce and hunting particularly hard.

Antelope are stalking game and as such second only to mountain sheep. The best bucks are nearly always solitary individuals, before the rut. During the winter they band up for mutual protection against their enemies, but when spring comes the old bucks go off by themselves, and usually there is little use in looking for a record buck among a band before the rut. Nearly always, only small, or young bucks, with horns not over 14 inches, will be found with the does, while the wise old boys are off alone. They will feed and bed alone, usually where they can see everything that moves within a quarter mile of their bed or

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feed ground. Like sheep and goats they also seldom look for trouble from above, and one should ideally stalk from above where possible.

Delmer Coiner, a friend and I once located a big band of antelope on a steep slope of a long ridge, running back to the Divide. We made a circle of some three or four miles, then worked down the top of that ridge above the band of antelope. There were some bucks in the band, and several that looked to have fair heads. When we were almost over the band, a couple of hunters started walking directly toward the antelope from a neighboring flat. Of course, the antelope instantly spotted them and started working up the ridge just under the comb where we sat, ensconced in a jumble of boulders. Those hunters both emptied their rifles at the band which was far out of range, then waved their hands and shouted at us. The antelope were watching those two hunters and filed past us at a trot not 50 yards away, directly below us. I readied my rifle and sat there watching them; not seeing anything with exceptional horns, I turned the safety back on the .285 O.K.H. Mauser and enjoyed the scene. The antelope all streamed past us and on up the ridge, gradually working out into a basin on a level with us about 200 yards; then they spotted us and started running in earnest, the while those dizzy hunters far below continued to wave and yell, not understanding why we did not shoot.

An old prong buck bedded out in the open, as they usually do, will give you your money's worth any time you attempt to stalk him, and if you do succeed, you will know you have earned him fairly. They have very good noses and can wind you a quarter mile very easily. Likewise they have most excellent ears and as before stated their eyes are second only to those of mountain sheep. Many times you will attempt to stalk a wary old buck, either bedded or feeding, and some doe or other buck you had not seen will spot you, take alarm and flash a warning with that white rump patch; instantly your buck will be on his feet and watching in every direction. Like coyotes, they seem to have a very well-developed sixth sense, and several times I have stalked them, knowing full well I had never shown an inch of myself or hat, yet they jumped to their feet when I was either in range or just out of range and barked and stamped their dainty feet, plainly aware of my presence, but not knowing where I was at, as they would turn and look in first one direction and then another and oftentimes beat it, usually away from me as well.

During the early stage of the rut is the best time to hunt them. Then the fine old bucks are on the move, searching for a harem, or else with a band of does and intent on fighting off any young upstarts who

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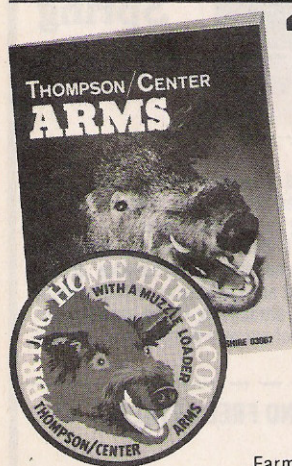


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wish to challenge their position. If a band of does is located, you can be sure bucks will be along before the rut is over. Usually, however, there will be younger bucks with a band and the old record heads will stay off alone, until the rut is well started. As a general rule, it is well to put the telescope on a band of does to determine if a worthwhile buck may be with them, but most of your time should be spent searching out the little pockets and ridges as high as the grass extends, for they will often be found, at least in this country, up to 8,000 or 10,000 feet elevation. The fine old bucks nearly always like to summer at the highest elevations, where good open ridges or flat-top mesas are available. They are a grazing animal and only browse occasionally on shad-scale and other small sage when grass is very scarce. What they can do to an alfalfa field is a caution, but that is seldom the place to look for a good one. They feed early in the morning and again in the late afternoon, usually spending the heat of the day bedded where they can watch in all directions. In this country they will usually come in to a spring and water once each day, either after feeding hours in the morning or before feeding hours in the evening. Desert antelope of Mexico, however, may go for days and weeks without water, obtaining sufficient moisture from the variety of succulent desert growths.

Mother Nature has well camouflaged the antelope. Although it is one of our most flashy colored animals, like a pinto horse or a Stone or Fannin ram, those changes in color tend to break up the outline of the beast when off at any considerable range. Often it is very difficult to show antelope to novice hunters, even though they are in plain sight and out in the open. The various white patches, while conspicuous, also help the beast to blend with his surroundings. If the sun is bright and any mirage running, they often appear to be pure white at a distance. Estimating the range of a band of antelope is a tricky business. They usually range at high elevations except in Canada and down south in Mexico, where the clear air of high altitudes often causes one to underestimate the range.

When after a head, you should make every effort to stalk to certain killing range, then drop the buck with one clean shot, if at all possible. Likewise use a high-velocity rifle that will expand its slug to extreme range. If you do not make a clean kill and the animal jumps and runs a distance before falling, it may pile up in a bunch of rocks or sage and scrape most of the hair from a shoulder in falling. When an antelope is wounded, the hair falls out or scrapes off easier than that of any game animal I know of. It is just like a well-stuck turkey, whose feathers are seemingly loose when it is dying. Head and cape should be removed where killed if you want a nice cape, otherwise the very brittle hollow hair is easily broken or damaged.

W.L. Dickey, Delmer Coiner and I were out for antelope in the Pahsimeroi Valley

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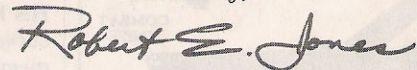
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I didn't get a moose on that trip, but the following weekend I got a young bull, again with excellent bullet performance from your 7mm 154 grain Spire Point.

I have been reloading my Rem. 7mm Mag for several years and have only tried one other manufacturer's bullet. I was not satisfied with its performance, even on paper. I have always gotten good groups with your bullets and I doubt if I'll ever switch again.

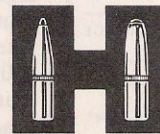
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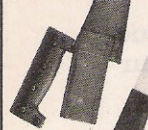
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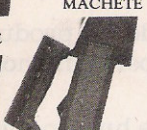
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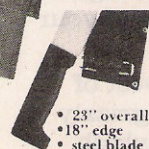
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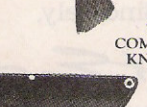
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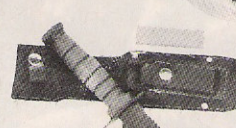
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in 1935. I soon located a very nice old buck in some broken ridges where an easy stalk was made, but he sensed our approach and jumped and ran to 300 yards across a steep gulch. There he stopped, barked and stamped his foot at us, as Dickey settled in the sling and trained the 8-power Lyman Target scope on the old boy. Just as he started to take off, Dickey's bullet caught him high behind the shoulders, breaking his spine and cutting that last bark short. He proved a beautiful 15-inch head with wide heavy bases and very wide paddles. The head appeared short, but the tips made a long curve back and down.

We loaded Dickey's trophy after removing head and cape and started back for the ranch, then next day, turned our horses to higher country. Just after noon we had topped out on a big mesa, or sage flat, high on the ridge, when I spotted another that looked good at a distance. A man named Jess had asked to go along and was with us. In view of his later actions I will not give his last name. Leaving Delmer and Jess with the horses for the buck to watch, I slipped behind a huge black, flat-topped boulder that lay about two thirds the way to the bedded buck and started my stalk. Arriving at the boulder, I set up the old Mossberg spotting scope and took a look at him through the sage. He was a beauty, and I estimated him at well over 16 inches. His horns swept up and out, then the tips curved inward in a perfect lyre shape. Remembering that Delmer had often stated he would surely like to kill a lyre-shaped buck with record horns, I slipped behind the rock and signaled for Delmer to make the stalk also. The buck was still bedded, apparently watching Jess and the horses. Delmer made it successfully, though he had to squeeze down and wiggle as flat as paint over a portion of the ground. I told him it was just the head he wanted and he crawled up on the flat-top rock. The old buck jumped to his feet to stamp and bark at us, but Delmer caught him just over the heart with a .257 Remington Roberts 100-grain—my rifle, and the same one Dickey had used earlier. The 100-grain Remington open point staggered the old boy and he started to back up a ways, then whirled and ran another 100 yards to our left and stopped again. Instantly Delmer caught him again, this time too far back, but it put him down. We had to kill him with a knife, then, to avoid further damage to the fine trophy which went 16 1/2 inches both horns as I now remember. Dressing the buck and removing head and cape, which we carried on with us, we rode around into another high basin some two miles distant and soon spotted a band out on a flat near a small lake. We had already looked over at least 500 antelope including many big bucks that day, but only Dickey's and Delmer's heads appeared to be in the record class, so we passed up all others.

Soon we located another band in the big basin and one buck appeared to have a fair head. Jess immediately said he would take that one and asked to borrow my rifle. He was carrying an iron-sighted Model 54 Winchester .270, so I gladly loaned him my .280 Dubiel Magnum Mauser with heavy barrel and 8X Lyman Targetspot scope. Delmer and I had a ringside seat as he started his stalk. He made it in fine style for some distance, then an old doe spotted him and the buck also took alarm when still 500 yards distant, then the whole band left on a run. While waiting for Jess to return, I had been searching an even higher mesa, to the north and some two miles away. Finally, I made out what appeared to be the largest buck antelope I had yet seen, bedded right out on top, where he could watch in every possible direction. His horns looked heavy through the 20X spotting scope even at that distance, so I decided to go after him as soon as Jess returned with my rifle.

Delmer said he would stay with the horses. Jess asked if he could go with me for the fun. I answered, "Sure, as long as you keep to the rear and out of sight." So we started. One long gully looked as if it would offer cover for the first mile and a half; after that we would have to trust to luck, as the scope did not show much cover—merely a slight falling off in elevation in the ground and some very short sparse

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sagebrush, beyond the head of that gully. It was steep climbing and at 10,000 feet elevation we had to stop often to get our breath, but finally made it to the top rim of the gully. The old buck was still there, about a half mile away, and another look through the scope convinced me he was the largest buck antelope I had ever seen and carried a head that should go well in the top of the records.

To our delight, there was another swale that extended well around toward the buck. From our position, flattened in the sage on the rim of the gulch, I could not see its extent, but it headed around to the downwind side of the old boy, and as long as he stayed in his bed it looked as if it might well allow us to approach in good rifle range. After another hot arduous crawl for over a quarter mile, we knew we were in range of my big rifle, but could find no place high enough to shoot from, so had to continue our crawl to a small knoll about 200 yards farther. After removing my hat and slowly raising my head in the sage, I saw the old boy bedded not 200 yards distant and looking our way, too close. There was also high ground between us, so I knew I would simply have to adjust the sling on my arm for a prone shot and crawl up in sight, then take him as quickly as possible, whether running or standing.

Continued Next Month