



HUNTING ANTELOPES EAST OF THE ROCKIES.

BY JOHN W. HAYS.



uriantly, dries in the August sun, and for the remainder of the year affords abundant pasturage for the wild things on the plain. The prairie is sown with the ragged horns of buffalos, and in places white with their bones. But the bison has disappeared. He was too slow of foot, Any Indian's pony could overtake him. The cowboy's bronco would dash among a herd and stay with them half the day. The Indians slew them for food, the trapper for hides, the hunter for sport, and where the plains were black with millions is now not one.

Hut the buffalo's companion, the antelope, yet remains. There is rarely an eminence on the great plains from which

these animals are not visible. Usually by fives and sixes, often by hundreds, sometimes by thousands. Wary, keen scented, with marvelous vision and fleet almost as the wind, it requires a shrewd enemy to approach and capture them. Now and then an eagle swoops down on a fawn, perhaps an old buck wounded in combat falls to the wolves, but their arch enemy is the shrewd, fleet and ever hungry coyote. Hut even this agile wolf is less swift than the antelope, and in direct and single race might never capture him. But he supplements his fleetness by sagacity. He hunts as the cowboy when he would capture that fleetest of running things, the wild mustang.

A half dozen coyotes will gather on the plain where a bunch of antelopes are accustomed to range, then separating to wide intervals lie in wait while one dashes at the game. Away the antelopes spring and the coyote follows. Three miles, five perhaps, and the chase has circled about. The coyote, fagged by the long run, falls behind, while the antelopes are only warmed to the race. Hut another wolf that has crouched till now springs up and off they whirl again across the prairie. Presently the deer, exhausted, can no

longer elude them. Then the whole pack closes in and quickly the prairie is strewn with venison.

A few years ago antelope were slain for the market, but now hunters may kill only for their own consumption—that is, kill if they can. But one must be a skillful rifleman to bring down a running antelope at a thousand yards. Sights and telescopes are worthless, for the muzzle of the rifle must be elevated, the distance measured by the eye, and the point which the game will reach while the ball traverses and falls through the intervening space closely approximated. But without certain precautions it is difficult to approach nearer than eight hundred yards, for antelope frequent the highest ground on the open plains and fly at the first intimation of danger.

When the plain is uneven, as among the sand hills, it is possible to hunt with a flag, and I have often drawn the game in close range by this device. They are curious. A strange object? What is it?

If the hunter or the gleam of a rifle is seen it is enough—they are away. But creep behind some sandy swell and on toward the crest of the hill. Look cautiously over the rise. There, on a low green spot is a buck, a thousand yards distant and with no intimation of danger. Quickly I tie red cloth about my face, put rifle to shoulder, and, dropping on knee, lift my head above the hill top. In a moment the buck sees the red flutter, throws up his horns, faces about and watches intently. Presently he advances a few steps, pauses, stamps; advances again, now slowly, now quickly, then whirls and circles to port or starboard, then nearer again. The cloth is well drawn over my face. I hold the streamer in my teeth and the loose ends beat freely. The rifle is to shoulder and full upon the game. He can see no movement or gleam. Only a hundred yards separate us as he pauses, full facing. Steady! Just at that white spot on his breast. A flash; the ring of my rifle! The dull "cluck" of a well-sent bullet, and through the smoke I see the antelope whirl and bound away. Not to gallop far, however. He turns, staggers a moment, then falls. I run forward with knife in hand, but the ball has done the work. An artery is severed.

For several days past our camp has been by a spring of water in the open plains. Eastward it is forty miles to

water, and to the north the desert lies dry for a great distance. This is the drinking place for all that lives on the plain around. The coyotes slink down at night and quarrel with our dogs; the wolves are something shyer, while the antelopes stand afar off on the hill top and gaze at our tents, and wonder if we are never going away.

Soon after we reached the spring an Indian came into camp and volunteered as hunter. Taking my rifle, for he carried none, we rode out together. Galloping to a swell on the prairie the Indian swept the expanse with glasses. Seemingly the game had left the vicinity, for no living thing was visible in the vast brown expanse. But presently a white dot of light appeared some miles away and soon there were others. The telescope shows a dozen antelopes feeding on the crest of a hill, and while we watch more come up and join them. They move leisurely about, and as they face us their white breasts gleam in the sunlight. Another moment and we are dashing to leeward. The Indian rides a mustang, while I have a bronco, both wild things of the plain. He takes the lead, and with hair streaming from under broad sombrero, head erect, shoulders back, sits in the saddle as glued to it, easily giving to the movements of his tough little beast.

Suddenly he reins up and dismounts. "Down!" and I follow. The game has sighted us a mile away and, lining up like a company of soldiers, stand watching. The Indian shields himself behind his pony and motions for me to follow. But the stubborn bronco will not lead. The more I pull the harder he pulls. A turn of the halter about the Indian's saddle pommel and he must needs follow. We walk close to our horse's shoulders, keeping step with their feet, heads bowed below their necks. And soon we have circled a half mile nearer. Peeping warily under my bronco's neck I see the game plainly. Not once have they taken eyes from us, but all in line, equidistant, with heads erect, the white facings of their yellow uniforms gleaming, motionless as soldiers awaiting word of command, they stand and watch us intently. Presently the leader steps from the line. He wears for insignia curled horns and has black markings upon the shoulder. He is old, has experience, knows caution. What manner of bronco are these? Six-legged beasts? Never saw one before.

Maybe they bite. Maybe they shoot. Let's get to leeward and find how they smell. And advancing slowly he circles about, followed in single file by forty others. The Indian stops. We are now within three hundred yards of them. He whispers to fire, but hold! they are circling nearer. A better shot at two hundred. Still like well-drilled soldiers they defile behind their captain, with eyes upon us and ears alert. We shift the ponies with them. They have not yet discovered danger. "Shoot, I tell you, shoot!" the Indian calls impatiently. Was it the rifle gleam or had they winded us? Like an arrow from a bow the whole line sped. "Shoot! Shoot!" What use? I toss the gun to him, but the game has disappeared below the swell of the prairie. Dropping his bridle he runs toward a hillock. Another moment and the antelopes are ascending the ridge beyond. Instantly the rifle flashes. I shade my eyes and watch. A moment, and five hundred yards away a puff of dust shows where the lead falls short. Now he has their range. But the game, terrified at the rifle's smoke and the bullet's whiz, seemed to spring away almost as fast as the shot that ricocheted after them. Again the rifle flashes. Watch! No dust, but a wounded antelope turns from the line and speeds off alone across the prairie. Again! And six hundred yards away another tumbles. Instantly the Indian tosses me the gun and, springing to saddle, dashes after the wounded animal. Not a whit of its speed is lost with an in-

jured leg, but, terrified at the wound, it springs over the turf faster than seems possible for creature on ground—more like a seagull skimming before the wind. The horses understand, and with ears erect and eyes intent follow without spur at the top of their speed. I can see the mustang quivering with excitement as he bounds like an eager deerhound. The Indian loosens the lariat from his saddle bow and gathers the coil as he rides. Three miles—four! The flanks of my wild horse are smoking, but the unshod feet beat the earth nimbly and the sinewy form springs without sign of fatigue. The wounded deer is close before us and straining with the terror that comes only to these wild things whose safety is in fleetness.

The Indian calls shrilly to his horse and beats his neck with the lariat coil. The willing creature strains excitedly and springs away gallantly. The turf whirls under me. Another mile flies by, and another. It is a wild, wild dash between the boundless prairie and the boundless sky. The excitement intoxicates, the blood flashes through my veins. It foams and sparkles as with wine. I am no longer a man on heavy feet, but a bird, an eagle darting on swift wings. Suddenly the Indian lifts his arm. Once, the coiled line whirls, then flies from his hand. Away! away! and the noose drops over the slender neck. stop! Down, bronco! On your haunches! A plunge, the rope twangs and the fleet game tumbles headlong.

