

ANTELOPE HUNTING THIRTY YEARS AGO AND TO-DAY

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DRAWINGS BY CARL RUNGJUS

IT IS difficult for the man of to-day to realize the abundance of game in the West thirty or forty years ago. Up to the time of the building of the Union Pacific Railroad, and indeed for a few years after that, the great game of the plains was almost as numerous as it had ever been. Hitherto the larger herbivorous animals had been exposed to attack only by people who sought them for food, and the number destroyed for this purpose did not equal the annual increase. The Indians and the few white travelers through the country made practically no impression on the herds. In 1873 I hunted in eastern Nebraska, on the Cedar, a tributary of the Loup River, not more than 130 miles west of the city of Omaha, and saw a number of bands of elk. A little further to the west and south, buffalo were plenty, and antelope were everywhere abundant. In those days the three noticeable animals of the prairie in central Nebraska and further to the westward were the buffalo, the elk and the antelope. To the north and to

the south of the Platte River these animals still abounded.

In those old times the antelope never seemed so numerous as the buffalo, the difference in size and color of the two beasts accounting in part for this. Nevertheless their numbers were very great; and on their winter range, where they gathered together in herds of hundreds, or even thousands, one received an im-

pression of their numbers which in the present day we can never get.

In the old times the traveler over the plains was seldom out of sight of the antelope. As he passed over each swell of the prairie he was likely to see before him a little bunch which, as he approached, became alarmed and ran off to one side, to wait and watch until the travelers had passed along, and then to resume their feeding.

The antelope's curiosity has become proverbial and was a great danger to it. Though the most keen sighted of animals, it never seemed quite satisfied with what it saw, and often insisted on taking a closer look, until finally it ap-



The antelope's curiosity has become proverbial.

proached within shot of the hunter. In early morning a tent or wagon would so puzzle a nearby antelope that it would walk up close to the strange object to discover what it was. On a number of occasions I have killed antelope from the camp, and again while stopping in the middle of the day to cook a little food have had them come to the hilltop, look for a time, and then gallop toward me until finally I killed one within forty yards of the fire over which the coffee pot was boiling.

When hunting one season in Colorado, the camp being absolutely out of meat, I set out one morning before daylight, on foot, to kill an antelope. No game was seen until, just as the sun was rising behind me, I walked up out of a ravine on a flat, and saw, about three hundred yards off, two buck antelope staring steadily at me. They looked, and looked, but did not seem alarmed. The distance was too great for a sure shot, and I decided to disregard them, hoping to find others within easy range. I walked up in plain sight, and toward the antelope, both of which stood looking at me. I continued to walk toward them, and they did not move, and at last when I was within a hundred yards of them I fired at the largest, and killed it. I have always believed that the



Doe, July.

antelope, which were looking directly at the sun, had no idea what sort of an animal it was that was approaching them. No doubt they recognized a moving figure, but no doubt, also, they were absolutely ignorant as to whether it was man, cow, or elk.

In somewhat the same way I have paddled up to deer feeding on the beach on the British Columbia coast, when the sun was low in the west and at my back. All the western deer, and the elk and buffalo as well, when unable to get scent of a strange object will stare at it long and

carefully, striving to learn by the eye just what it is.

I learned to hunt from the Indians, or from men who themselves had been taught to hunt by the Indians, and usually have killed my antelope by stalking. I

early learned that if meat was needed, the one quality necessary to secure it was patience. Often I have looked over a hill and seen a bunch of antelope feeding well out of range, and so stationed that there was no apparent way of approaching them; but a study of their position usually showed that somewhere not far away there was a ravine or a hillock which would afford cover, and often an hour or two of waiting resulted in such a shifting of the lit-



Old Buck, in Rutting Season



White Fawn, October.

the herd's position as to bring them into a situation where they could be approached.

It is but a few years since I had an experience of this kind. A bunch of antelope were accustomed to feed in a wide flat at the foot of a considerable mountain near the ranch, and one morning I rode in this direction, and when three-quarters of a mile from the place where the animals were to be looked for, crept up to the top of a ridge, and saw that they were in their usual place. Making a long round I rode under cover of another ridge to a pine-crowned ledge of rock above the antelope; but when I crept up to the top of the hill and looked over, I saw that they were far out of range, but feeding undisturbed. I had the whole day before me, and from my point of concealment I watched their movements. It was interesting to see the little band living their every-day life. There were several kids, half a dozen does, and a couple of bucks. They were safe and careless, yet always alert, and always graceful. The little kids were playful and quick, sometimes chasing one another here and there, again nibbling a bite of grass, or perhaps going close to the mother and lying down, only to rise again to their feet to resume their play. Sometimes when one was chasing the other, the one pursued would erect the

white hairs of the rump, so that the rump spot became much larger than usual, and after a little would let the hairs fall down to their normal position. The erection of the hairs seemed a sign of alarm. Now and then a doe would lie down, folding her slim legs under her very deliberately; but most of the animals continued to move about, and if they went a little way from one that had lain down, she stood up and followed them. Several times I thought the whole band were going to lie down well out of rifle shot, but they did not do so, and at last, when the sun began to decline toward the west they began to work nearer to the hill on which I lay. They did this very slowly, and an eager hunter might have grown weary of watching them; but I was well content with what I saw. Usually, the does seem to lead the band, the bucks following along behind, sometimes grazing, sometimes scratching heads and necks against a sage bush, or even pretending to light it.

Gradually the old does worked nearer and nearer to where I was, until at last they were all within easy range. The bucks were still a little further than I liked, but after a time they also came within range, and I picked up my rifle, which had been lying by my side, and loaded it. Then I began to debate with myself whether or not I should kill one of these antelope. I had watched them so long that I really felt more or less in-



Young Buck, July.



Mixed!

terested in each of the little band, and I inquired of myself whether it was worth while to shoot at and frighten them merely to satisfy myself that my hand and eye had not entirely lost their cunning. The more I thought of it the more I hesitated; and while I did not absolutely determine that I would not shoot at them, I put down the rifle, and took the cartridge from it. And then those absurd antelope, as if aware of my dubitation, kept coming closer and closer, climbing the hill toward me, until at length all the does but one lay down not more than forty yards from where I was. The bucks were still pottering around, and I felt a little like shooting one, but the meat was not actually needed; and at last, just before sunset, I backed away from my point of observation, went to my horse, cinched up the saddle, and, mounting, rode back to the house. I really have never regretted it.

Patience was called for when I killed the largest and fattest antelope I ever saw. This was in western Nebraska, on the range.

In the early days of cattle raising in the trans-Missouri country, the antelope fed in great numbers among the herds of cattle, as, since the beginning of time, they had fed among the buffalo; and in those days the few ranchmen, whose herds grazed on the prairies of Colorado and Nebraska, depended largely for their flesh food on the antelope. There were plenty of deer and elk, and occasionally a few buffalo to be had, but the antelope were the most abundant, and, in certain localities, the most easily killed of all the game of those prairies.

The killing of this big buck took place in the sandhill country of Nebraska, and gave me an early lesson as to the watchfulness of the antelope, the value of patience in hunting it, and the knowledge of its habits, which might be acquired by long practice.

With my friend, Captain North, the brother of Major Frank North, so famous twenty-five years ago as the white chief of the Pawnees, and the invincible leader of the Pawnee scouts, I was riding across a broad flat, beyond which high bluffs rose steeply. Suddenly against the sky line, above these bluffs, we saw rise, like two curving spider lines, the horns of a

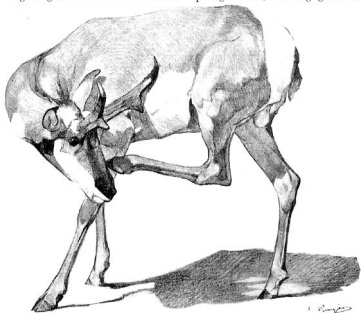
buck antelope, and my friend and I at once slipped from our saddles, on the side opposite the buck, and lying on the ground, permitted our horses to feed near us. The buck was a very large one, but there was no hope of approaching him so long as he remained where he was. I said this to Captain North, who replied that we were in no hurry, and might as well wait to see what the animal would do. The antelope stood there for some minutes, taking a long and careful survey of the country, clotted with feeding cattle and horses, and then, turning about, walked away from the edge of the bluff, out of sight. I asked my friend if it were worth while to try to creep up on him, in the hope that he had stopped not far away from the crest of the hill, but Mr. North said, "Let's wait a little longer and see what will happen." We had sat there perhaps ten minutes when the buck again appeared, and once more for a long time looked over the country. Then he disappeared again. This was repeated the third time, after a still longer interval, and who the animal went out of sight this time, Captain North said to me, "Now, go and see what you can do." I hurried across the flat, and climbed the side of the bluff, and when I peered over its edge through a bunch of weeds, I saw the old buck, head down, and apparently half asleep, chewing his cud, near a large doe. My shot was a lucky one, and the buck raced by me and down the steep bluff, and when I followed down where he had gone, I soon came upon him lying in the grass at the foot of the hill.

It long remained a deep mystery to me how Captain North knew that the antelope would come back to look twice and not three times, or how he knew that he would come a second time, after we saw him first. I know now that there was something in the animal's action when it withdrew the last time that told the practiced hunter what might be safely done. Although I had not then wit enough to observe it, I know now that the last time that the antelope went away from the edge of the bluff his lowered head and unconcerned walk showed that he was finally satisfied that no danger threatened from the flat, and that for the time he might leave that side unwatched.

While antelope were formerly so abund-

ant that usually it made no great difference whether the man in need of meat got his shot early in the morning, or at mid-day, or in the afternoon, this was not always the case; and sometimes food was needed very badly. When hunting I commonly rode almost to the crest of each prairie swell and then dismounting, and removing the hat, advanced very slowly toward the ridge, stopping every two or three steps and carefully scrutinizing the ground that came in view be-

made except when their heads were down and they were feeding. Often his whole head might be in plain sight, and if, when the antelope looked at the hunter, he remained motionless, it would stare long and then put its head down and resume its feeding. There was thus often time to select the animal, and even to wait until it had put itself into the precise position desired. A side shot was always preferred, for there was then no danger of spoiling the meat, and I long ago learned



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yond the ridge. If an antelope was seen it was likely to be one of several, and the more there were in the bunch the greater likelihood that one of them would detect the hunter. After creeping forward as far as possible, the head was raised very slowly until it was so high that the eyes could cover much of the slope which began to fall away just beyond it. The important thing was to move very slowly, studying each foot of the ground as it appeared. If there were one or two antelope now in plain sight, no motion was

to shoot at the little curl of hair just back of the elbow, through which the black skin shows. As in most herbivores, the heart in the antelope lies low, and usually the creature drops to a well-placed hall. At the same time I have seen an antelope run four hundred yards with its heart torn to pieces.

If a man on foot suddenly comes in view of antelope not far off, and they see him, he may often bring them within shot by dropping immediately to the ground and lying flat. They see something—

they know not what—and after more or less running backward and forward and circling about are likely to come within range.

Everyone who has hunted antelope at all knows very well that after one of these animals has been startled and has run to the top of the hill to watch, it is useless to attempt to approach it. As soon as the hunter disappears from his sight, the antelope runs to another hill, and watches from there. On the other hand, I have several times killed antelope which were watching the wagon in which I was driving, by jumping from the wagon on the opposite side, lying flat for a time, and while the animal's attention was directed to the wagon I have been able to get under cover and within shot. In the same way I have occasionally, when riding with another man, dropped from my horse and let my companion go on with both horses, he holding the animal's attention until I had got under cover.

The hunter of course finds that no two sets of conditions which he has to meet are quite alike, and a good hunter will adapt himself readily to the necessities of any given case.

The antelope's tenacity of life, and his ability to escape pursuit, even when desperately wounded, is well known, and so many greswome tales exemplifying this have been told that I will not add to the number.

Perhaps more remarkable shots have been made at antelope than at any other American game. This is natural, of course, since, being usually in plain sight, they were often shot at from great distances; and many a man, making a lucky guess at distance, and holding just right, has been enormously proud of a very long shot that killed. Of such long shots few were successful; but those that were so, often made for the rifleman who fired them a great—but wholly undeserved—reputation. I myself made the most extraordinary shot at an antelope that I ever heard of, which, however, has nothing to do with good shooting, but rather with the erratic course that a rifle ball may take. With several scouts, white men and Indians, I rode over a hill, to see three or four buck antelope spring to their feet, run a short distance, and then stop to look. I made a quick shot at one,

which dropped, and on going to him I found him not dead though desperately wounded. The animal had been standing, broad side on, his face toward my left. The ball had struck the left elbow, splintering the olecranon, passed through the brisket, broken the right humerus, turned at right angles, and gone back, cutting several ribs, broken the right femur, then turned again at right angles and came out through the inside of the leg, and struck the left hock joint, which it dislocated and twisted off, so that it hung by a very narrow string of hide. I never again expect to see so extraordinary a course for a rifle ball.

Antelope coursing, once a favorite sport in the West, especially at army posts, has, of course, passed out of existence with the passing of the game that was pursued. The antelope was the swiftest animal of the plains, yet among the antelope there is as much difference in speed and endurance as exists among horses. Some are swift and some slow; some long winded and some easily tired; so that, while some antelope could be readily overtaken by greyhounds or even horses, others were never approached. Perhaps the best record made by a greyhound was that of General Stanley's dog Gibbon which during the Yellowstone expedition of 1873 caught unaided twenty-one antelope.

The antelope is rapidly decreasing in numbers and is distinctly in danger of extermination. This danger is being recognized, and the statutes of several States forbid the killing of antelope.

In my time antelope were very abundant in the western Indian Territory, in Kansas, Nebraska, all of what was then Dakota, and to the westward. In the last three States, hundreds—often many hundreds—were seen in a day's march. Now they are practically exterminated from those States, except a very few in the dry country on the extreme western borders of each; but these survivors are to be numbered by hundreds—not more. In Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico there are still a few antelope, confined chiefly to the high dry portions devoted to range cattle. Similarly in Oregon, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona there are antelope, and no doubt a few in southern California; while in Texas, Mexico and lower California they are more numerous.



The Chrysanthemum.

California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah protect the antelope, either unconditionally or for a term of years; the close time in New Mexico expiring in 1905. Curiously enough Kansas has no law on the antelope, although a few probably exist along her western borders. Besides this absolute protection, several States limit the number of antelope to be killed; Nebraska, which has a very few left in the northwestern corner, permitting one antelope and one deer, or two antelope or two deer, to be killed in a season. Nevada protects the female antelope, but permits the killing of three males. In Wyoming two antelope may be killed in each open season; in Manitoba two antelope in a season. The Northwest Ter-

ritories, though limiting the killing to "three deer of any one species" in any one season, has no specific provision about the number of antelope to be killed in any season.

It is a hard matter to protect the species, for in regions where there are many antelope, there are not many men, and violations of the law are quite sure to go unpunished. However, it is not the rifle of the hunter that will exterminate the antelope, but another and greater danger. The radical remedy for the decrease is, however, obvious. If the United States Government will take up the matter and provide for the species' protection; if Congress will authorize the President to set aside, in such of the forest reservations as he may see fit, game refuges where no

hunting shall be permitted, the antelope, and indeed all the other species of American large game whose fate is now trembling in the balance, may be preserved for all time. Surely the antelope, the only existing species of its extraordinary family, ought to be worth protecting. It has no near relatives, but stands alone among mammals. It is the one hollow-horned ruminant which sheds its horns sheaths, and if it shall become extinct the world will have lost not only a species, but a genus and a family, which nature has taken some millions of years to develop.

Except man, the only enemy that it need dread is the domestic sheep, which is now devastating the West, driving out the game, ruining the old horse and cattle ranges, exterminating the plants native to the country over which it passes, and leaving in its path a sandy or dusty waste, from which the wind picks up the soil powdered by the multitude of hoofs, carrying it away, and leaving only the rock and gravel behind. Over much of the western country the domestic sheep has driven the antelope from regions where it formerly abounded, and as the sheep press

northward and eastward, the range or the antelope will necessarily become more and more contracted. It is to be hoped that the forest reservations which have been set aside will be protected by governmental order from the ravages of the sheep, and that within their limits the antelope may still have a chance to feed. And when, if ever, game refuges such as have been spoken of shall be set aside, each one should hold all ample territory suited to the life of the antelope.

No species of American game is likely to respond more easily to protection than the antelope. If it can be freed from persecution by man it will speedily re-establish itself. Its natural enemies are few, and if it has to contend only with them in its struggle for existence, it will survive and do well. It is most at home in many wide stretches of arid land where the farmers' fences can never interfere with it. It can live and thrive among the herds of cattle that feed upon these high plains, and the amount of grass that it consumes will never be large enough for it to be a menace to the stockman.



Female Fawn, July.