NEWS FROM: Colorado Parks and Wildlife

Big Game 2016:

**Pronghorn provide unique hunting challenge**

By Colorado Parks and Wildlife

Serious pronghorn hunters are willing to wait years for the opportunity to hunt trophy bucks in the best pronghorn units in Colorado. All Colorado pronghorn hunting tags are issued by draw.

The average buck tag requires two to three preference points, but tags for premium units can require five or more points. Doe tags are easier to draw, but most hunters still need at least one point.

The majority of pronghorns are in northwest Colorado and on the eastern plains. Small populations of Pronghorn also are found in North Park, Middle Park, South Park and the San Luis Valley.

Demand for tags in the northwest region is usually highest, so more points are required. There are two reasons more hunters apply in the northwest: big herds with big bucks.

In eastern Colorado there are also large herds and trophy bucks. Most of the land, however, is private with the exception of some isolated pockets of public land including the Pawnee National Grasslands in the northeast and the Comanche National Grasslands in the southeast. The good news is that many ranchers and farmers in eastern Colorado are willing to grant permission to those who want to hunt pronghorn.

The best advice for a hunter to gain access to private land is to ask permission well in advance of the season. Never wait until opening day. If properly asked in advance, many landowners are willing to allow pronghorn hunting. Some will even offer directions to the best pronghorn locations, and information about watering holes and road access.

In 2014 for all manners of take, 16,390 hunters harvested about 8,800 pronghorn for a 53 percent hunter success rate. The statewide pronghorn population is estimated to be 79,160.

**Stalking pronghorns**

Hunters lucky enough to draw a pronghorn tag in Colorado face a unique adventure that requires a different set of strategies than those used for hunting deer or elk.

Compared to deer or elk, pronghorn are easier to locate. They roam wide-open rangeland rather than woodlands or steep mountains, they travel in large visible herds, and they do not hide in thick vegetation.
But that doesn't mean they're easy to hunt.

Pronghorn evolved with keen eyesight and the ability to outrun predators. The vision of a pronghorn compares to a human looking through 8X binoculars. Pronghorns' ability to quickly burst into a sprint of over 60 miles per hour helps them to stay out of range of even expert marksmen.

So what can a hunter do to increase the odds of bagging one of these magnificent unique game animals? The three major strategies are stalking, ambush and flagging.

Stalking an animal with the vision of a pronghorn on the open range can be an exercise in frustration.

If it is said that deer and elk hunters must be patient, pronghorn hunters must learn to be REALLY patient. A stalk may include crawling on your belly for an hour only to have the animals spook and quickly move a half-mile away. Experts estimate that only one out of five stalks gets the hunter close enough for a shot.

A hunter who sees the animals before being seen gains a huge advantage. That means avoiding ridge tops and hills. Pronghorn can spot objects on a ridgeline at great distances.

It is also important to consider wind direction to avoid sending a foreign odor in the direction of a pronghorn. Winds tend to change direction less frequently on the wide-open prairie.

But for hunters, avoiding being seen by a pronghorn is most important. Sometimes it takes hours of hard work to get within range. The initial part of a stalk requires a hunter to move through draws and along the back sides of ridges to avoid detection. Then you should be ready to crawl the final few hundred yards to get close enough for a shot.

Be prepared to crawl through yucca, sagebrush, cactus and cow pies. Some hunters sew leather patches on the knees of their pants and on the elbows of their jackets for added protection against rocks and sharp objects.

Crawling through an open field can be exhausting. If you are lucky enough to get close without being spotted, take the time to catch your breath and steady yourself before the shot.

Some hunters prefer to wait for pronghorns to come to them. Waterholes and fence lines are the best places to wait in ambush. But waiting also requires great patience. Pronghorns alternate between feeding grounds and watering holes at varying times of the day. But it's unpredictable how and when pronghorns move.

Fence lines are good places to wait because although pronghorns have the ability to leap fences, they generally do not jump over unless they are really pushed. They prefer to crawl under or find a way around fences. One reason biologists believe pronghorns don't like to jump is because
their powerful back legs have the capacity to leap, but their front knees are not suited for the impact of landing.

Searching for a place where pronghorn go under a fence can put a hunter in a great position to wait in ambush. This requires advance scouting to find crossing locations and good hiding places.

Some pronghorns can also react with curiosity to shiny things and moving objects that draw attention. "Flagging" is the technique of trying to pique a pronghorn's curiosity and getting the animal to come to you. The concept behind flagging apparently originated when early settlers were crossing the plains and noticed that antelope readily approached covered wagons.

After you spot an animal, walk back and forth in an adjacent downwind draw while hoisting a white handkerchief on a stick. Curious animals will approach right away. If they don't, they probably won't come in at all.

Some people have tried sitting still with a flag flapping in the wind above them. But stationary objects tend to go unnoticed.

Shot selection is extremely important. Pronghorn present a small target. At a weight of just over 100 pounds, the vital target area is about the size of a small plate. Shots are usually much longer for pronghorn than other big game animals, especially on windy days when the animals are more alert. The average pronghorn hunter should know the capabilities of his or her rifle. A scope is essential.

The ideal situation for any hunter is to get a shot when the animal is standing still. Don't try to shoot a pronghorn that is running.

Archers and muzzleloaders face even greater challenges. Most successful archers use blinds or decoys or both.

Blinds are best used around water holes or known crossings along fence lines. A blind should be set up at least one week before planning to hunt to give the animals a chance to become accustomed to it.

Decoys cut in the shape of a pronghorn outline have been known to attract aggressive bucks that want to chase challengers out of their territories. Some bow hunters use decoys large enough to hide behind. But decoys also attract other hunters and are not recommended for use during rifle seasons for safety reasons.

Since the time of Lewis and Clark, early settlers called pronghorns "antelope." Pronghorns, however, are a unique species found only in North America. Their historic range is west of the Mississippi River from southern Canada to central Mexico.
Biologists estimate there were 30-40 million pronghorn in North America prior to European settlement. By the 1920's, there were fewer than 40,000. Hunting laws and sound wildlife management practices helped pronghorn rebound.

In the early 60's there were only about 15,000 pronghorn left in Colorado. That number climbed to 30,000 in the 70's, and stands at about 79,000 today.

For more information about hunting in Colorado, see: cpw.state.co.us.