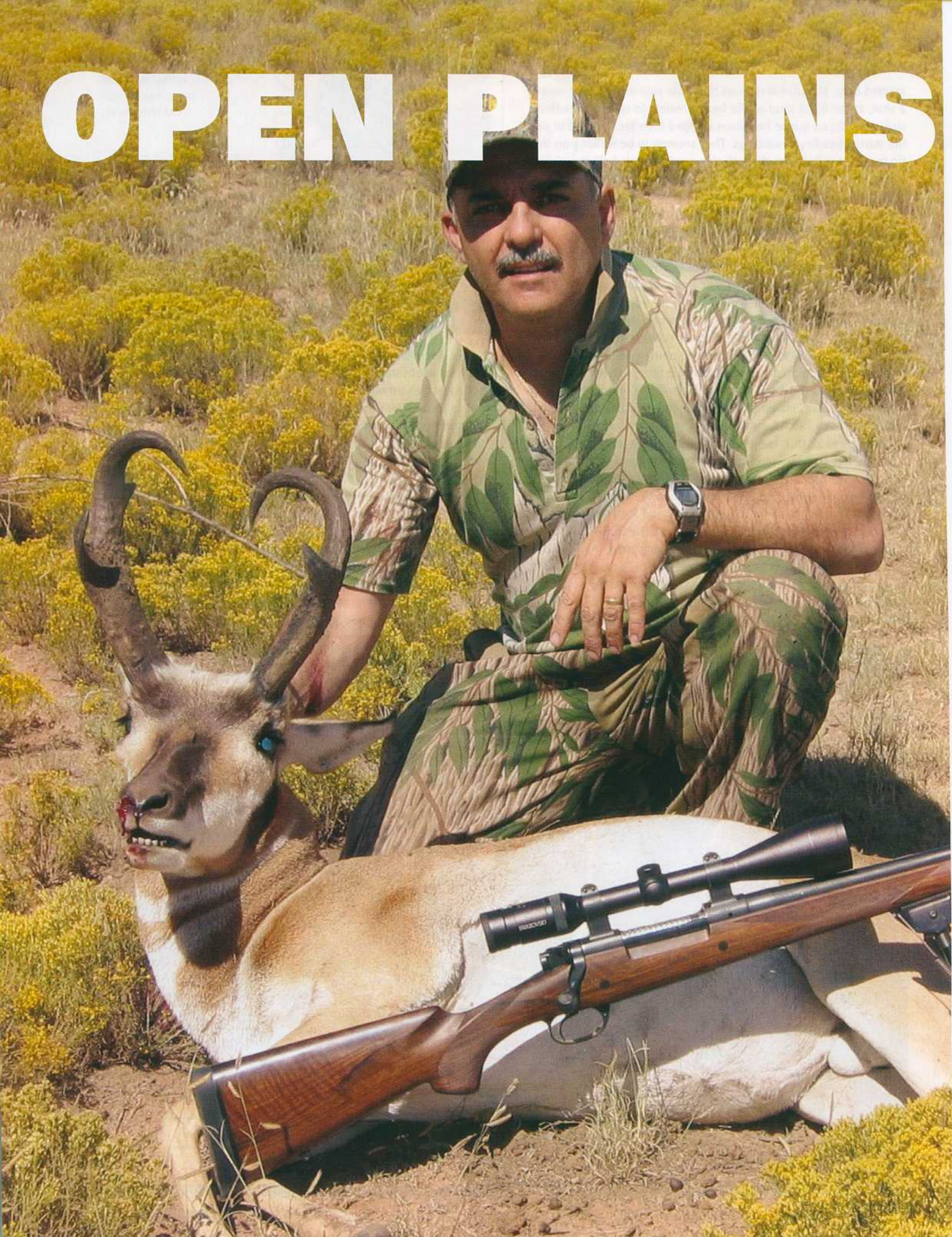


OPEN PLAINS



PRONGHORN

Tony Pizzata travels to New Mexico in pursuit of one of the quickest game animals on the planet.

MAIN PIC: Tony and his trophy pronghorn. INSET: Depending on the property, some animals have experienced little hunting pressure.



THE PRONGHORN ANTELOPE is the fastest animal in North America and can reach speeds of 97km/h. Their distribution covers the southern end of Canada, down through Montana and Wyoming and as far south as New Mexico. Although they prefer open plains and grassland, they are also found in Arizona's desert scrub. Next to the chamois buck, I think the pronghorn is one of the most graceful animals a hunter could wish to pursue – their thick brindle, orange and white coats, striking facial features and black hooked horns make a spectacular trophy.

Recently, a hunting mate and I had booked a pronghorn hunt in New Mexico with guide and outfitter, Patrick Holehan of Tucson, Arizona. Patrick has exclusive rights to several ranches in mid-eastern New Mexico for pronghorn and coues-whitetail deer. He'd been recommended to me by a close friend who'd hunted with him several times and assured me the operation was first class.

Several emails and a final phone call to him secured a tag for Maurice and I for the 18th and 19th of September 2004. Yes, that's right, there's only a two-day season for pronghorn in New Mexico. Would I have enough time to locate and secure an animal or would I even see any? These questions and more, I put to Patrick and several of the references he supplied me. The answers from all concerned were the same – unlike deer hunting, there are lots of animals seen and plenty of opportunities, as I'd soon find out.

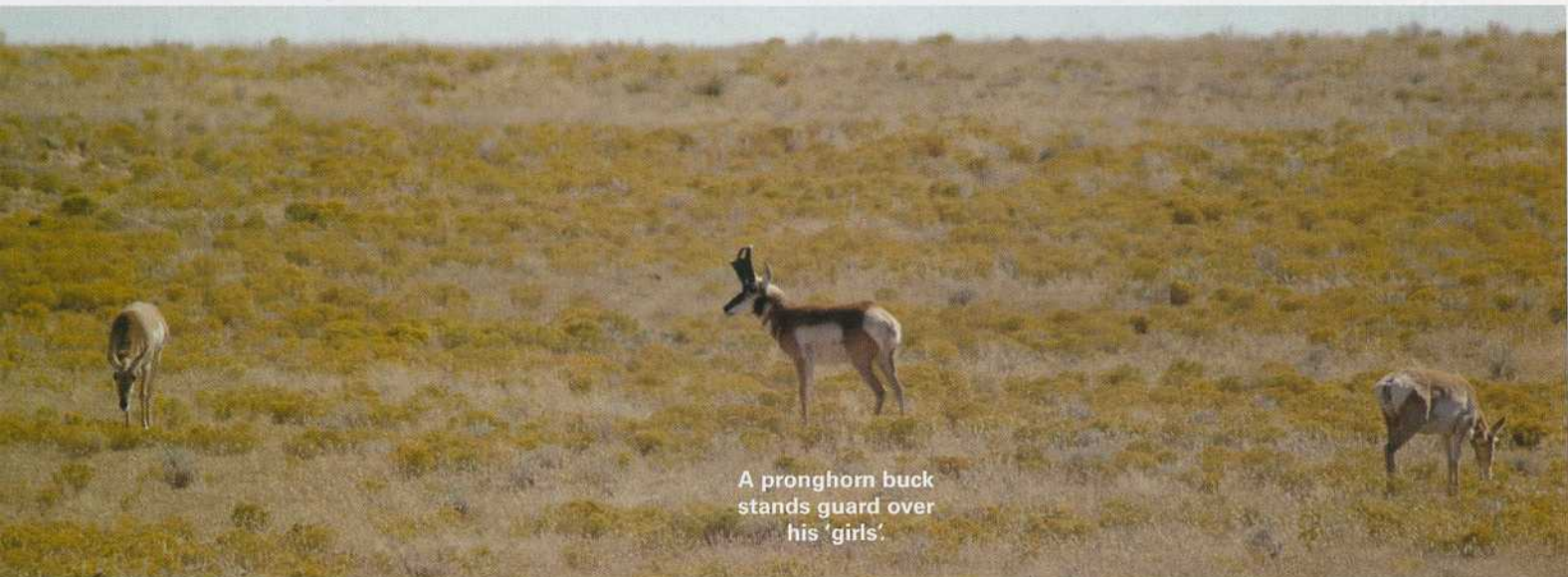
Base camp was a small, but very comfortable motel in Mountainair, New Mexico. In fact, most of the rooms were taken by Patrick's hunters and guides. Our hunting area was only a short drive from town and Maurice and I had been allocated

a modest 35,000 acres to hunt on with our guide, Bill. The plan was to spend the first day or so scouting for big bucks, although I'd been assured Patrick's guides had already done the groundwork. Still, it'd afford us enough time to get a feel for the country we'd be hunting, test the ranges at which shots would be taken and most importantly, give me the opportunity to take some photos and video.

Each paddock consisted of several thousand acres of completely open terrain. Some offered gently rolling hills and the odd scattered tree and all were carpeted with lush green pasture. On our short trip from base camp to the ranch, the odd coyote and several pronghorn were spotted. Entering Encino, where the ranch was located, Bill pointed out our intended hunt location and soon after turned off the main road and onto a dirt track. Within minutes we'd spotted antelope and although only scouting for the day, all three sets of binoculars were quickly put to use. As the rut was in full swing, every mob of antelope had at least one or two bucks present. Only minutes into scouting and with two representative heads already spotted, my trigger finger began to itch!

I was so close I could see the buck panting; his girls were nervously milling around as he scraped the earth and urinated on it, marking his territory. Shortly after he seemed to calm down and after gaining his composure, woke up to the fact that I was a predator and he led the does away to a more comfortable distance.

The next morning we repeated the process and again saw lots of shootable bucks. In most cases, both Maurice and I were convinced we'd probably be shooting at a range of 100 to 300m and our hunt could probably finish as early or as late as we'd want it too, depending on how choosy we became with our trophies. That afternoon Patrick and his guides led the hunters to another nearby property to sight-in their guns. Most of the hunters were Americans from various parts and all had their own firearms. This was the first time I'd traveled without my trusty Blaser 7mm; although I'd applied for a permit through the US government, the whole process became too difficult. In addition to guiding, Patrick is also a custom gun maker and had offered me the use of one of his guns. I chose a custom Model 70 Winchester in 7mm Rem Mag topped with a Swarovski scope.



A pronghorn buck stands guard over his 'girls'.

By mid afternoon we'd covered a lot of territory and seen dozens of pronghorn bucks. I'd been told they have excellent eyesight and are lightning fast. However, with the rut in full swing, the bucks in most cases didn't seem to mind us being there. In one particular instance a reasonable buck was spotted with two does about 500m away. Bill decided we'd take a better look and continued to close the gap. As the pick-up drew closer, the buck took off. It wasn't us he was worried about, but another buck who'd decided to encroach on his territory. Head down, he raced towards the intruder, until the other immature buck left the way he came. Within moments the buck returned to his two ladies and continued feeding.

Now only a couple of hundred metres away, Maurice and I photographed the trio and soon after, I decided to get out of the vehicle and grab some footage. As the buck wasn't a shootable animal, Bill said I should try and stalk closer for a few more photos. With the camera strapped around my neck and video in hand, I began a slow stalk towards them. At 80m or so I began filming and taking photos. Getting closer, I repeated the process until, believe it or not, I was no more than 40m from them. I couldn't believe how quiet the animals were although I suppose huge expanses of territory, very little hunting pressure and a very short hunting season kept the antelope at ease. In other areas, such as Wyoming and Montana where numbers are high, the pronghorn are a lot harder to approach, as whitetail and mule deer are also being chased over the same country.

This firearm had been built for a national director of the NRA, Todd Rathner, who had been kind enough to loan it to me. All of Patrick's guns are built on a Model 70 controlled-feed action. These actions are double square bridged and milled to accept quick-detachable lever rings or Allen cap head rings. The lugs are lapped, the receiver ring and bolt face are trued and the working surfaces are re-honed and polished to perfection. A jeweled bolt, some fancy engraving and a custom stock coupled with a premium Krieger rifle barrel made this outfit a pleasure to use. A test fire at Patrick's range revealed the 7mm was shooting 63mm high at 100m. I'd fired two shots and both holes were touching so content not to spoil my luck, I decided to put the 'Model 70 Custom' away for use the following day.

Next morning Bill, Maurice and I sipped coffee at the front gate of the ranch, awaiting first light. It was opening morning and eager to start hunting we discussed plans and strategies. Both Maurice and I were confident we'd get a nice trophy each as we had several good bucks earmarked from scouting we'd done earlier with Bill. Slowly cruising down the well-worn track we crested a hill expecting to see a small mob of antelope where we'd left them the previous day, but the mob was nowhere to be seen. Bill whispered that they'd likely be down in an open gut somewhere ahead so a short walk would probably allow us to find them before they spotted us. Maurice had first shot so I grabbed the camera and my binoculars. The three of us headed off across the paddock and then topped a small rise.



The Aussie hunting pair cape out one of the animals in the shade.

Slowly inching our way forward, we sat for a thorough glass of the surrounding country below.

It didn't take long before two mobs were spotted in the distance. After observing them for a while, we agreed there was at least one buck worthy of closer evaluation. The mob in question was at least 500m away. As Bill had a set of mountain radios handy, I suggested he go back to the vehicle and head across to the hill we were on, allowing Maurice and I to stalk in closer on foot. Unless the buck was a monster the plan was to radio Bill to come in and pick us up. The plan went well and about a half hour later, Maurice and I were no more than 200m away from the unsuspecting mob. We'd managed to use the odd bush and dip in terrain to our favour, belly crawling most of the way.

Laying prone in the open meadow, unable to set up my camera in case I spooked the antelope, we both lifted our binoculars for a look. In hindsight, I could have taken a few photos but it was the real thing this time and not a scouting session, so I didn't want to risk spooking them. Slowly looking back I remember

BELOW:
A small pronghorn mob flee the approaching hunters.





Maurice and guide, Bill, alongside his fallen buck.

seeing the pick-up parked high on the ridge behind us. Bill had the spotting scope on us and was watching our every move.

The first buck was definitely not a shooter, as he didn't have any prongs off his horns. The second had length, but didn't hook at the top. So after enjoying a few more minutes glassing the unsuspecting mob, I pulled the radio out and asked Bill to drive down. The antelope heard my voice and Bill's response over the radio and in no time made their escape.

Bill said he didn't think there was a shooter amongst the mob and knowing we probably wouldn't take a shot, he'd let us enjoy stalking in on our own. Quite excited at all this nonetheless, we drove back up the hill and onto the track. Bill indicated he'd seen a good buck when he'd returned to the truck and was anxious for a better look. Soon after, we spotted him located on the crest of a hill with three does alongside him. A close look with the spotting scope revealed plenty of length, good prongs and an excellent cape. The buck watched us as we approached from several hundred metres away. He was no doubt a mature animal with all senses on full alert. He'd probably

been shot at in previous years we thought, as he seemed to be quite intent on our approach. At that moment, the buck gathered his harem and nervously milled around them. As we drew closer and out of sight into a small depression, Bill slammed the brakes on and whispered for us to get out quickly and head up the hill.

"Stop about fifty metres from the top and set up for a shot," he anxiously said. "I'll drive off and hopefully they will slowly feed back towards you."

Maurice and I sprinted up the grassy gut in short order, as Bill disappeared out of sight in the pick-up. Within seconds, Maurice had the Harris Bi-Pod open and dropped down behind the bolt-action ready for a shot if and when the buck showed. Both flat on our stomachs, we anxiously awaited any sign of movement. Shortly after I saw the tops of a set of ears that slowly materialised into a doe that was now at the crest of the hill we were on. Within seconds, another appeared, both heading straight for us. At 60m they both stopped but hadn't seen us as they both kept looking back in the direction of the buck. At that moment he came tearing up towards them, pushing them forward, not 40m away. Both of us lay motionless in the grass; Maurice had little more to do than release the safety and pull the trigger. As the click of the safety sounded, both does discovered our location and swung back towards the hill. It was too late for the buck, which headed straight for us at less than 50m. As Maurice squeezed the trigger an instant *thump* confirmed a solid hit and the buck dropped where he stood.

I don't know who was more excited, as both Maurice and I ran to his trophy. Within minutes Bill crested the hill in the pick-up after having heard the shot. Buck number one was down and it was only early morning. After lots of photos we loaded the buck and decided we'd head back to a nearby tree to cape him out.

About two kilometres down the road we spotted another buck and his harem some 300m in the distance. Bill stopped and produced the spotting scope. The buck was a true trophy, with good horn length and all the bells and whistles. His tops forked deeply to form a heart shape and a non-typical prong grew rearward of the back of one horn. Bill explained the hunt was young, but I knew I'd be looking a long time to find another antelope that good. Within moments of viewing him through the spotting scope, my mind was made up to take him. Closing the gap to a respectable distance on foot, Bill produced the rangefinder and called the shot at 200m. Placing the cross-hairs on the buck's shoulder, I slowly squeezed the trigger and the buck collapsed on the spot. We now had one in the pick-up and one on the ground. Again we took lots of photos and in no time had loaded buck number two and were headed for the shade to cape them out.

By 11am we'd salted the skins and our mission was complete. We'd planned to head back to Arizona that afternoon and look for a bobcat and a few coyotes, but that's another story. ■

For more information about a pronghorn hunt, contact In The Wild LC, PO Box 2651, Pinetop, Arizona 85935, USA. Tel: +0011.1.928.369.1651 or email: billinthewild@msn.com