

2008 AZ Big Game Super Raffle Antelope Winner Cal Sutton

I wanted to say thank you! What a great experience it has been to hunt Antelope for the past year! I started with absolutely no Pronghorn hunting experience, that is a fact. I finished this hunt with a whole new insight into a species that I really knew very little about. I knew that Pronghorn were fast and possessed great eyesight. I learned that they live to about 15 years and have to eat numerous times throughout the day to maintain energy due to their small stomach. I knew they had distinct white markings like the one on their rump and that their hair is hollow which facilitates a unique climate control system all their own. I could shoot well out to 300 yards, but learned that with practice I could consistently group under 4 inches at 500 yards. For a short period, it was almost like being back in Marksmanship class during High School.

Oh, what cartridge should I use on this hunt? I thought that both the 7mm WSM and the .257 Weatherby would make solid choices. Having a very accurate .300 Weatherby I could certainly "reach out and touch" an antelope (even when the right conditions allowed a long shot); however, I was concerned about how much Pronghorn meat would be unedible. After much consideration I decided on the 6.5X284 Norma---I'm not much of a European caliber guy, but this round seemed like it had a lot going for it. Fortunately Midway was selling Nosler Custom ammo for it, so I order several boxes. I was on track. I have had a Cooper single shot 6.5X284 Norma sitting in the safe for years, so politics aside, I could not wait to test it in the field. I had a Leupold 4.5X14 with the Boone and Crockett reticle mounted on it...for guidance. Seemed like all I needed was some help from mother nature, perhaps she would offer up one of her finest. Hunting has always connected me with nature in a way unlike any other activity. I believe it is the primacy of the activity. I was certainly looking forward to getting primal on this hunt.

Oddly, one of the most lasting surprises became more about the Antelope habitat and Arizona in general. Being a native Arizonian, I thought I had seen most of the state over the past 44 years. I was in for a pleasant surprise. The ABGSR Special Tag provided the horsepower for me to climb out of my daily routine and venture out into some of the most remote areas of the State. I'm still moved by the uniqueness of our hunting fields. The high desert prairies hold incredible beauty....the openness....the vastness....truly spectacular! The grasslands to the Southeast of Tucson had me question if I was still in Arizona. Any one of the large Central Mesas in the State certainly opened up country to me that was previously unseen. Clearly, 19A, 19B, and 18A have taken huge hits to Antelope habitat as a result of real estate speculation. Since my college years in Prescott I hadn't realized how much "progress" has been made in the area. It is clear that the Heritage Fund and programs like the Big Tag Super Raffle are imperative to protect our remaining hunting resources. Thanks, for all of your efforts!

I got THE CALL last July, it was quite a surprise! Actually, it was a voicemail on my cellphone after a long day at work. What was that? It sounded like one of my friends having some fun. But no, the date was right, and this was no joke! Something about

being the first name out of the hat, but the reception was scratchy and I didn't hear what animal it was for. I replayed it again, WOW! after being skunked 14 years in a row, I was finally going to hunt Buck Antelope, and not for 10 days, but a whole year.....way cool! The second lucky thing that I had going for me was my very understanding wife ,Jane, who helped me pack the truck on the way out, and unpack after I got back. We have two great girls ages four and two, I wanted to take them--they love elk, ducks, and dogs, but most of the areas were simply too remote. I would have to go this either alone or with a hunting buddy.

During the weeks between the scouting missions I was able to study several related resources: "Hunt Arizona 2008 Edition--a compilation of Survey, Harvest and Hunt Data" produced by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and "Arizona's Pronghorn Antelope" by Brown and Ockenfels. Finally, I located a great DVD for field judging Pronghorn, "Size is Everything" put out by Pronghorn Guide Service it proved to be right on target!

After weeks of scouting, I had a short list of nice candidates. I finally decided to pursue this great looking buck that I had located out on the Coconino Plateau. Initially I had spotted the buck out in the open running with another buck and three does. It looked like I had scared them off of one of the many water improvements that the local rancher had made in the area--I saw many areas utilized by Antelope all over the state, that would not have been--had it not been for the development of water sources by the existing cattle ranch. A quick check with my 10X binoculars confirmed he was good but would require a photograph for further evaluation. I quickly set up my camera for a shot--using my Swarovski Spotting scope I immediately went into full dia-scoping mode. I could hear myself say silently, "okay you look marvelous, that's it, move your head a little to the left, nice mass, now turn your head show me your prongs, beautiful! The pictures confirmed he was a very good buck, certainly everything that I had wanted and most likely pushing the mid 80's for B&C.

A week had passed and I wanted to get back out and see the buck again. I decided to take him if I had the chance. I met up with my brother and nephew early the next morning, they were there to pre-scout for their hunt in September. We all spent the day glassing and checking water sources. When the sun went down, we had counted 14 bucks and over 25 does. Due to work commitments the guys had to leave that night and I needed to drive into town to get a new tire. I had blown the sidewall out of mine, probably on a piece of jagged limestone common to the area. I lost half of the next day at the tire shop. Determined to make sure the day was not a total scratch I was able to do about an hour of glassing before darkness. It was late when I made it back to camp and I found myself crawling into bed at 11:00 that night.

My alarm awoke me at 4:00 the next morning. I had a quick breakfast of orange juice and cereal, then it was off towards the Buck's last known location. I spent the morning glassing multiple areas. I did locate a number of other "mature" bucks, just not the one I was looking for. Later in the morning, I headed over to some small hills that provided a vantage across the lower plateau. Some serious glassing with my 30X Doctors turned up some more antelope but not even a good buck in this herd. So, I headed over to

check out the other side of the hill. Upon gazing out on the plateau I could see a lone Pronghorn. The binoculars confirmed it, there he was---the Buck that I had been looking for!

I was only able to stalk up to within 400 yards of him by crouch crawling and belly crawling, then he would move off. ARE YOU KIDDING ME? I was beginning to realize that I must look pretty stupid to this Buck. This was going to be it. I had the rifle rock steady between the rest, sling and my shoulder. The scope was dialed all the way up. The crosshairs held firmly. When I ranged him again he was looking straight at me! A little over 400 yards away he turned broadside. There was virtually no wind. I exhaled one last time and I squeezed slowly..... The Buck turned and started off to one of those places far away from hunters, he took three, then four steps and slowly stopped.... as if he forgot something, perhaps his soul continued... His balance became compromised and then as if in slow motion he teetered for a split second and then fell.....freely... unto the vast, red Coconino Plateau. I waited several minutes, still looking through the glass waiting ..looking for any movement....he was down! I felt very grateful for this harvest. Yes, this was a very good day...in fact it was great day! I knew the real work was just about to start. Antelope are not large animals, so I was able to field dress him down quickly, using techniques learned at the AGFD Hunter Education course. That was a good thing because the temperature was nearing 100 degrees and I needed to get him cooled off quickly. The 120 grain Ballistic Tip did its job. It entered some six inches behind the front right shoulder, quartering forward it scrambled the Buck's engine room and come to a stop--all energy spent--on the offside shoulder just under the skin. Retention weight was excellent and expansion was full. I was very pleased with the performance of the equipment used, and fortunately I can say the snake chaps were not tested this time!

I purchase a combo package of tickets for the ABGSR every year, more as a donation to help preserve our Hunting Heritage and maintain the highest quality hunt experience for those lucky enough to draw out. This year it came full circle for me, and I am thankful. I hope it comes full circle for you! Good Hunting!

Sincerely,
Cal Sutton