

I'M ALONE, HUNTING PRONGHORN in a place in eastern Montana that I've visited every October for more than 30 years. After months in the mountains, where the world is foreshortened and closed in by tree-filled peaks, I've come to let my eyes stretch. After parking the pickup, I hike up to my favorite vantage point on a sandstone outcrop that runs for half a mile.

These ridges of carved sandstone, backbones of the land, provide protection and footholds for woody plants that cannot survive on the open prairie. This year the junipers are laden with blue and silver berries. In depressions grow scrubby skunkbrush sumac and bloodred roses. Touches of gold and orange in currant bushes are repeated in the lichens that encrust the rocks. Crevices hold mosses, grasses, and other plants.

The glory of prairies is at dawn. The clear, clean air is festooned with smells of pungent sage and juniper, sweet sap oozing from a wounded tree, the dry scent of a place too long without rain, and a faint, dusty odor from ghostly homesteads. I'm caught up in the cycles of life, seasons, and the day, briefly forgetting that hunting is the main reason for being in this wondrous place. Rifle cradled in the crook of my arm, I sit on a rock that was sand when the dinosaurs walked. Here I can see forever across the prairie to a horizon etched by nothing manmade. Far to the west and northwest, the Snowy Mountains appear as blue mounds on the edge of the world. Even farther away, to the southwest, the jagged peaks of the Crazy Mountains reach over the hills like hands of a giant seeking to pull himself into view. Rolling out in all directions from where I sit are hills of tawny yellow, interspersed with blue-green sage. Some gray areas, swept clear of vegetation, reveal how closely rock lies below the soil.

This rock is doomed to slowly erode into soil by vicious swings in temperature, wind, lichens, and other plants. The roots of ponderosa pines split the blocks apart like hydraulic wedges. Beneath the pines, piled

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Song OF THE Land

LISTENING TO THE PRAIRIE, WHILE HUNTING ITS SWIFTEST INHABITANTS

BY LORI MICKEN



upon each other for years, are their cones, old ones gray as the rock, new ones tan and sticky with pitch.

Seven shots break the quiet. One is so far away it sounds like when my ears pop while driving over a mountain pass. There's another shot, then two more. These also are distant, like a stomach growling. Somewhere, hunters are finding pronghorn.

Shouldering my rifle and pack, I move on to revisit each tree along this favorite ridge. The old giants, killed by porcupines, have fallen down into a bed of their own needles from years past. That newly chewed sapling ponderosa may live, even with a primary branch gone, or it may bleed to death before another spring. Tiny, fragile seedlings seek nurture and protec-

tion in sheltered spots. They will need a snowy winter to keep from drying like the grasses around them.

The pronghorn, if they do come, will be nearly soundless, even at full run. Their tiny hooves will barely touch the earth as they fly over a hill, the herd flowing down a draw. They might graze within view, always with one sentinel on guard for predators. Or they may materialize miles away on the far hills, too distant to hunt, mere specks of white and tan in my binoculars.

For now, I am content to watch for them while drinking in this stark land—to feel, hear, and smell the vast wonder of the prairie, to be lost in time.

My heart sings with the song of the land. The whistling wind, the *snap, snap, snap* of a



“CONFLUENCE OF THE YELLOWSTONE AND MISSOURI RIVERS,” 1833 WATERCOLOR BY KARL BODMER. © HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE/CORBIS

precisely spaced so each can live. Aster, daisy, gayfeather, hairbell, and gumweed still manage to bloom here in mid-October. Small, late, and few in number, they make dots of violet, white, yellow, purple, blue, and gold on the plain background of parched grasses, gray-green sage, and dull yucca.

Half a mile east, above the ridge's high end, where trees are thick enough to be called woods, a recently built windmill creaks and spins, pulling water from below


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the rocks. I can smell the water before I see it spilling into a trough, then running off over the sandstone and down a gully. When I was young, I thought it silly that horses and cattle were said to lead thirsty cowboys to a river by smell alone. But now I know water does have an odor, even pure, clear water such as this. It tastes good.

There are no pronghorn visible from this new vista, so I return to the lower ridge to glass for my prey, trudging the ruts worn by wagons, model Ts, and pickups.

The pronghorn appear at once, seeming to rise out of the earth. They float up over a hill, first looking like moving fence posts, then changing to sleek animals.

It is impossible to fool them. From the ridge, I head toward a spot nearly a mile off. They watch. As I move, they move. I need binoculars for what they see unaided with their large, brown eyes. As I sneak below a hill, they seem to ignore me and graze. Half a mile later, I creep to a hilltop to spy. They are again a mile away, watching from a different hill. Their frank, open stares appear mildly surprised at my persistence, my invasion of their land.

An hour later, while staring out at the empty prairie, I think back on the two herds of pronghorn. It seems I'd imagined them, like dreams in a vision quest. But they were there, and I watched them run. I have seen the sky and earth for the past million years. It has been a wonderful hunt. 

grasshopper on its last flight, a *cheep* from a vesper sparrow, the shrill *cheee* of a red-tailed hawk, an explosion of wingbeats when a sage grouse erupts from cover—all are but a few notes on a page otherwise empty of sound.

Then the pronghorns appear from nowhere. A group of eight rushes down a nearby sage-covered hill. They pause and mill at a fence before quickly ducking underneath. Before I can find the big leader buck in my scope, they burst away like drag racers. They are too far and too fast for me to chance a shot. I watch them race across and over the amphitheater of hills. So majestic are the pronghorn that the sound of heraldic trumpets would be far more fitting than this quiet.

I lean my rifle on a tree and sit back down

on cold, rounded stones. As the iciness seeps through my jeans, my body heat seeps out. Endless years have sculpted the rocks, carving strange indentations and holes like empty eyes and gaping mouths. Here is a small cave, just right for a coyote to curl up in. An eye tooth of stone hangs from another cave's lip. As the sun creeps higher, the temperature quickly grows warm and I shed my hooded sweatshirt. A breeze that barely touches me on the lee of the ridge portends the winds to come later in the day. They will whine and moan in these few rocks and fewer trees and whistle in my ears.

I stand and stretch, then amble back to the deep ruts of road etched across the land. Grasses and sages, cacti, yucca, and broad-leaved herbs are scattered across the dry dirt,