

ANTELOPE

Mark Thomson • Arizona • 2006 • Public Land • Guided

I don't remember exactly when I first contracted the disease. I just knew it was getting worse as the years ticked by. I needed to find a cure... an antidote.

Hope for an antidote came in the form of a single word on my computer screen - "DRAWN". On my 10th year of applying I had finally drawn a coveted Arizona antelope tag! That single word just might lead me to a book antelope and the long awaited cure for my sickness. Everyone seems to have their dream animal. For whatever reason, for me there has always been something special about big antelope. So it follows that my dream has been to get a "book" pronghorn, a big guy ... one scoring at least 82 Boone & Crockett inches.

I've taken a number of pronghorn

over the years on my own, but my Arizona unit was more than 900 miles away from my home in Colorado. That would limit any scouting I could do without blowing a big chunk of my vacation time. I contacted Rom Dryden of Rincon Outfitters in Tucson, Arizona. I had hunted with Rom for Coues deer many years ago and consider him a friend and his operation to be first class. Rom was familiar with my area and knew of a remote portion of the unit that got little hunting pressure. Rom had already committed to guide his dad, who had also drawn an Arizona

antelope tag in another unit, so he wouldn't be able to make my hunt. However, Rom told me he had a guide who worked for him named Jim Seay. Although Jim was just 20, Rom said he was confident in Jim's abilities.

I left two days before the opener, which would give Jim and me a day to scout. Because of some last minute commitments, Jim had to leave Tucson later than planned, so he gave me directions on where to meet. It involved crossing a small stream. Because of heavy rain the night before, the "small" 10-foot wide stream had overflowed its



I wondered if we had blown the only chance I would get."

MIKE EASTMAN

banks and was running over a 100-foot wide area the night before. Although it had receded considerably, there was still no way we could get our vehicles across. I crossed on foot and decided to scout nearby while I waited for Jim to show up with the quads and camp. I found four antelope, but nothing to get excited about. Jim arrived a few hours later and also brought his dad (Jim Sr.) along to help out around camp and assist us with glassing. I welcomed the extra set of eyes. While his dad set up camp, Jim and I headed out to scout.

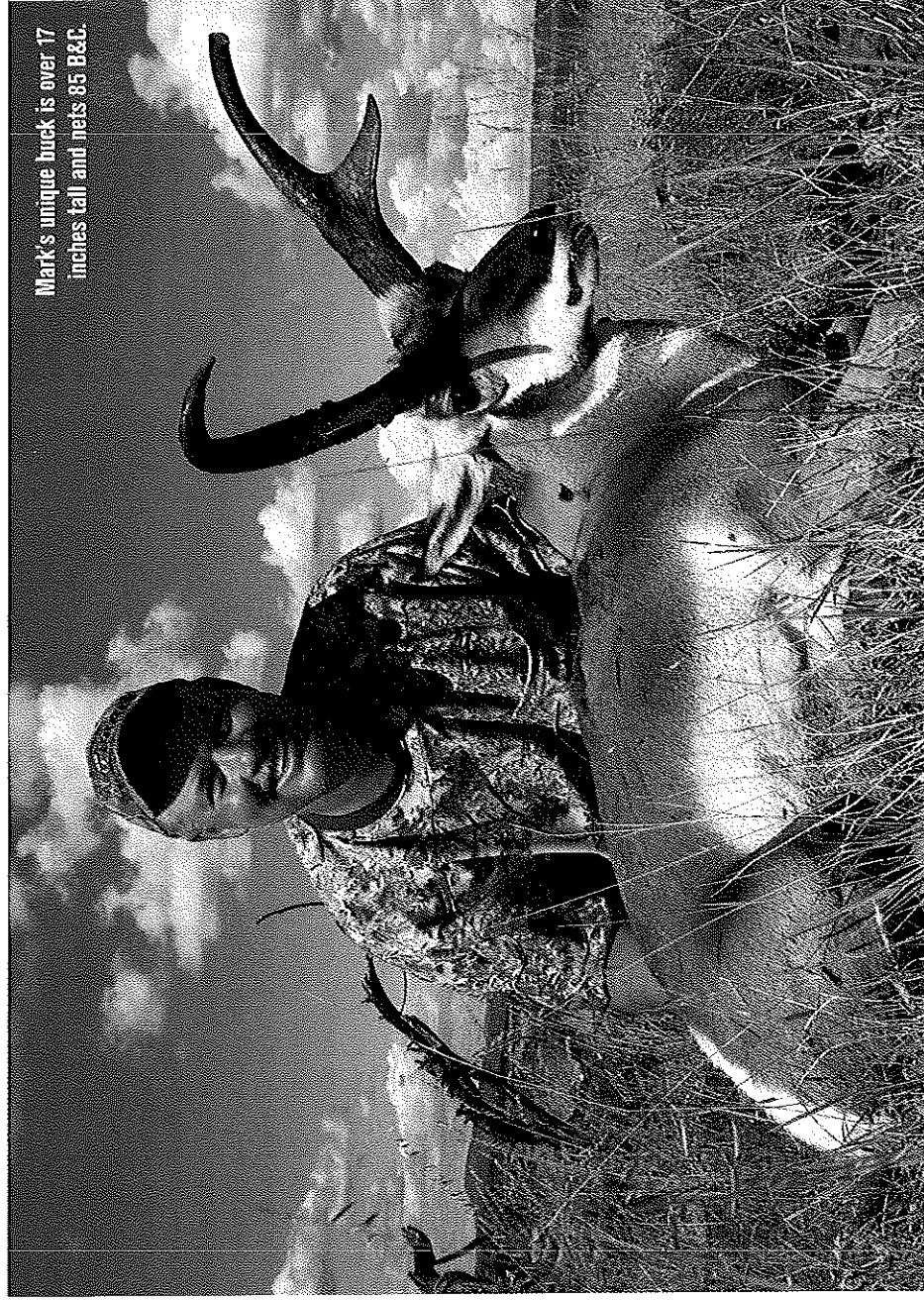
The country was huge, remote, and beautiful. It was nothing like any antelope country I had hunted in. There were large rolling hills, deep ravines, and volcanic rock scattered everywhere. But the biggest difference was the Juniper trees - lots of them. Even in the openings, a stand of Junipers wasn't far. As we scouted that first day, it became apparent the antelope weren't reluctant to enter the trees and disappear. Although we spotted a single here and there and a few small groups, we still didn't see anything

worth going after. Rom had recommended we stay out of the area near a waterhole, where they had earlier spotted a big buck with forward hooking horns, because we might spook him.

Opening day! It rained hard again during the night. This didn't make me optimistic about our plan for me to hide a couple hundred yards from water while the others scouted elsewhere for the buck. I was there at first light and ready - sitting near a waterhole with mud and puddles everywhere. I still had hopes the big guy would show up out of habit, so I waited. Around mid-morning I spotted a buck with several does about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away. I couldn't tell for sure if it was the buck we were after, but since the herd didn't seem to be heading in my direction, I decided to go after them. The rocky terrain made walking difficult. As the sun climbed higher the water evaporating from the saturated ground made it muggy and I was soon wiping the sweat from my eyes. The trees and hills made it seem as if I were hunting deer or elk,

not antelope. It seemed with every rise I crested, the breeze was blowing a different way. So, I changed my direction of approach several times as I worked closer. When I figured I was near where the herd should be I slowed to a crawl and peeked in and out of the trees. Where were they? How could I have lost them?

About noon I heard the sound of Jim's quad. As he pulled up he said excitedly, "Hop on, I found him!" I'm sure we traveled at least five miles to the spot where Jim and his dad had located the big buck and his does. Jim's dad looked at me and said, "He's big!" What a way to calm my nerves! Jim and I took off over the hill where the big guy was last seen. There he was! Wow! It was the first time I had laid eyes on him; he was amazing. His prongs were long and heavy. His horns hooked forward towards his nose in a unique way. Best of all, it looked as if he was in a spot where I could get a shot. So much for that idea - we were going crosswind to him and had just started working our way to a tree that I could



Mark's unique buck is over 17 inches tall and nets 85 lbs.

shoot from when in an instant, they were gone. The crosswind was fine for the buck we were after, but apparently the herd had split. The second group was in a draw behind some trees where we couldn't see them, but downwind of us. That's when I saw the other big buck with the herd. He was more typical, but definitely a book buck. The bucks were with about 20 does. It seemed odd that two big bucks would be running together in the same herd during the rut. I figured they must have had some sort of gentleman's agreement.

We raced after the herd and finally spotted them again about 700 yards away. As I was looking through my binoculars at the big guy's buddy I was thinking, "What a great buck, I'll bet he'll go 83 or 84." Just then, "my buck" walked near him - wow, there was no doubt about this guy. I wanted him. We had been watching the ever-changing wind, but not closely enough. The does started to mill around nervously and just like that they were gone. We circled and glassed and covered miles, but couldn't find them again. I wondered if we had blown the only chance I would get at my dream buck. I tried to console myself with knowing at least I had the opportunity to see the two biggest bucks of my life. Somehow that wasn't enough. I knew that just seeing the big buck would never cure me. I had to make him mine.

It rained again during the night and the air was fresh as we left camp. I couldn't help but think how lucky I was to be hunting this beautiful country where I knew a special antelope lived - even as rainwater from a damp quad seat I had wiped off too quickly soaked into my shorts. We parked the quads and hiked. We walked several miles, always wanting to peek over just "one more ridge." It seemed as if we had looked everywhere. I knew my buck could step out of a group of trees we had just glassed minutes ago, or walk out from a dip in the landscape at any time. We just had to keep at it. We hiked to the highest point in the area where we had last seen him and glassed. We had a great view, but still no big guy. His group seemed to like traveling and must not have gotten word that they were supposed to hang out in the same general area during the rut. Jim was always optimistic. "Don't settle for anything less, we'll find him," he said.

After several hours of glassing we hiked back down to the quads. We were just rounding a bend when we both spotted

antelope butts heading up a draw about a ½ mile away. "Please let it be them," I said to myself as we raised our binoculars. A quick glance revealed those unmistakable forward hooking horns, it was him! Another chance! We would be doubly careful with the wind this time and started a wide circle around the herd. After about a 20-minute stalk we were where we thought we needed to be. There! Through the trees - it was the big guy's buddy. Was he at the front of the herd or the rear? I got ready to shoot, but after a few minutes and no more antelope it was apparent he had been bringing up the rear. We had only just missed them. Another big circle. I grabbed Jim's shoulder, I could see a couple of does through a five-foot opening in the trees, not far, less than a 100 yards. I set up quickly with the bipod legs extended on my rifle and waited. I knew I would have only seconds to shoot through the small opening between the trees. I was worried a doe might get in the line of fire and ruin my chance. Three more does go by, my heart is pounding, and then there he is, his unique horns identifying him without question. The crosshairs had barely settled when my rifle roared. I heard that familiar whump, but because of the recoil I didn't see him go down. Jim wasn't 100 percent sure either, but his expression told me the buck was ours. As we walked to where the buck had been standing, Jim gave me the thumbs up. An incredible sense of relief washed over me. I hadn't realized how worried I'd been that I would mess up and lose him again. The big guy was everything I had hoped for and more, with lengths over 17 inches, great bases, long prongs, and of course, those forward hooking horns. I was finally holding the long sought after medicine in my hands, the antidote for my illness. Surely this will cure my obsession ... right?

After drying the required 60 days, the buck's horns are 17 5/8 and 17 2/8 inches long. It scores 86 1/8 gross and 85 0/8 net Boone & Crockett.—EHJ

Mark Thomson will receive an X-Tract Multi Tool from Buck Knives for his story. For details, see page 4.

BUCK
KNIVES

SCOUTING FOR TROPHY ANTELOPE

By Mike Eastman

When hunting trophy antelope, it's vital to scout and do your homework. If there is one trophy animal that is ripe for scouting, it's an antelope buck. These animals are among the most aggressive ungulates in North America. A mature buck antelope will have his own territory and guard it during the spring, through the rut and until he heads out for wintering grounds.

I'll start out by taking a map of the region and marking off my hunt area with a pencil. Next, I visit the BLM regional office or call the BLM range manager and get documentation of where the water is on public land. Where there are cattle grazing on public land, you're bound to find numerous antelope. The cause and effect is the availability of water for livestock

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark resides in Thornton, Colorado and is a 49-year-old single dad of twin 11-year-old boys. He's been a project manager for a large construction/engineering firm for 26 years. Mark enjoys all types of hunting and is an official measurer for both the Pope & Young and Boone & Crockett clubs.