



PRONGHORN

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Sonoran Pronghorn Special Edition

ARIZONA ANTELOPE FOUNDATION, INC.

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AAF Mission Statement:

The Arizona Antelope Foundation is an organization dedicated to the welfare of pronghorn antelope. The Foundation's Mission is to actively seek to increase pronghorn populations in Arizona through habitat improvements, habitat acquisition, the translocation of animals to historic range, and public comment on activities affecting pronghorn and their habitat.



ON OUR COVER

Ken Cook, AAF Life Member and regular AAF fence project volunteer, captured the Sonoran Pronghorn herd leaving the removed temporary holding pen at Vekol Valley on January 14.

Ken also captured Sonoran Pronghorn entering the temporary holding pen on December 8, 2021, see page 11.

Pronghorn is a quarterly magazine for the members of AAF. Letters, comments, news items, articles, pictures and stories are all welcome and will be considered for publication. Address all such items to: Lenée Landis, Pronghorn Editor, PO Box 1191, Mesa AZ 85211 or by email at info@azantelope.org.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Welcome to 2022, hope the year is starting off well for everyone. As you can note below, this Special Edition *Pronghorn* is dedicated to Sonoran Pronghorn.



Congratulations go out to Game & Fish—especially John Hervert and Jill Bright for all their work on the Sonoran Pronghorn, bringing them back from the abyss. The AAF is currently involved with fence removal in the Vekol Valley (55 miles) which remain from five previous cattle allotments now removed. This is made possible with our partners at BLM, who are also rehabbing waters in the area which will go a long way to taking care of Pronghorn and Mule Deer. We also, with our fund raising efforts and a match by the Foundation, were able to put up an additional \$30,000 for Sonoran Pronghorn water development.

We recently had a release of 22 Sonoran Pronghorn back into historical habitat. So far they are doing well. While everything in this issue is about the Sonoran Pronghorn, we want to mention Arizona Game and Fish has accomplished a deal to take some excess Pronghorn from Utah, to be released in our Game Management Units 18A and 21.

Our first Governors tag brought in \$76,000 at the annual Reno Wild Sheep Convention so we are off to a good start for HPC funding this year. If you remember my end of year update, we would



like to hit a 400 membership goal this year. So, if you know someone who has always thought about it or would be a good candidate how about an ask and let's increase our membership. That is all for now—I hope to see you on a project.

Ken

"LIBERTAS AD VAGOR"....
FREEDOM TO ROAM



VEKOL VALLEY-BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT, US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE, AZ GAME & FISH DEPARTMENT SONORAN PRONGHORN RELEASE PEN RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT

BY GLEN DICKENS, VP/AAF

On Sunday October 3, 2021 we held a volunteer by invitation only reconstruction project of a 20-acre Pronghorn enclosure pen. The pen, constructed of 8 foot T posts, needed the 6-foot woven wire and green screening material re-hung. This in advance of a planned December 7-8 Sonoran Pronghorn supplemental release to the Vekol Valley approximately 30 miles southwest of Casa Grande. The Sonoran Pronghorn subspecies is not hunted, is presently federally listed as Endangered and its restoration is being co-managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. The lands for the planned release are managed by the Bureau of Land Management

This pasture design is intended to create a predator free environment for holding new pronghorn for a couple of weeks calming period. Twenty two pronghorn were released into the pen on December 7 & 8, 2021 (please see the detailed article about the capture and transfer in this issue). The actual pen take down and release occurred on January 14, 2022 (please see the article about the release in this issue as well).

This release pasture is located on the eastern boundary of historic endangered Sonoran Pronghorn habitat in the western shadow of Antelope Peak and is intended to extend their population distribution. Regular readers know each January, we have been conducting projects to remove un-needed livestock fence in this zone to make it more Sonoran Pronghorn friendly. That January project will have already occurred on January 14, 2022 by the time this issue goes to press and will be reported on in the next quarterly Pronghorn. The pen reconstruction project went off without a hitch and we have the following groups of folks to thank for this successful half day project:

- Representing the AAF Board: Ken Meadors, Dave Cagle, Dave Laird, Joe-Bill Pickrell, Darrell Tersey, and yours truly
- AAF members and volunteers: Earl Polvent, Johnny Johnson, Betty Dickens, Steve Rusiecki, Dave Cruce
- AGFD: Noah Ratliff
- BLM: Roger Joos, Damon Haan
- USFWS: Stephanie Doerries, Sarah Dzielski
- Arizona Wildlife Federation: Trica Oshant Hawkins

Thanks everyone for your efforts!

All photos courtesy Betty Dickens

Devoted Effort—The 2020 Pen Construction Team





October 3, 2021
SONORAN PRONGHORN

Pen Reconstruction



ARIZONA WILDLIFE FEDERATION ASSISTS WITH BOMA SHADE CONSTRUCTION FOR PRONGHORN RELOCATION EFFORT

**BY TRICA OSHANT HAWKINS-VOLUNTEER PROJECTS MANAGER,
ARIZONA WILDLIFE FEDERATION**

On September 28 and 29, 2021, a few staff and volunteers from the Arizona Wildlife Federation (AWF) were invited to join staff and volunteers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and National Park Service to attach shade structures to the existing boma (capture pen) in preparation for the upcoming Sonoran pronghorn translocation.

A boma is a large, stockade-like enclosure, the sides of which are mostly opaque. The word boma originates from Swahili from a time when pre-colonial African tribes built bomas (mostly out of brush) to serve as corals to contain their domestic animals and protect them from predation.

The use of bomas to capture game animals was pioneered in South Africa by Jan Oelofse, in 1968. Jan was seeking a way to reduce stress, injury, and myopathy (death) during the capture of large numbers of wild animals. Jan devised and employed very large, funnel shaped bomas into which large groups of animals could be herded. The animals were ultimately funneled down to the narrow end for individual capture and transport.

To capture the Sonoran pronghorn on the Cabeza Prieta NWR, a three chambered boma was constructed inside the huge (1 square mile) captive breeding pen. The boma was originally constructed in 2008 for previous translocations. The three chambers (each a large, circular pen) are connected through gates that can quickly be opened or closed. The first chamber, being the largest, is used to passively capture and hold the pronghorn until time for the translocation. Animals willingly enter this chamber to access feed that is placed inside. The pronghorn are conditioned to use the boma and become quite comfortable with it. The boma gate is closed when moving day nears and there are enough pronghorn inside. Because they are used to the boma, there is little, if any, stress on the animals.

When translocation day comes (as described in Glen Dicken's article), part of the herd is moved into the middle boma. From this group, several animals (usually 2 to 4 at a time) are captured by hand (mugged) and moved to the processing tables in the final boma. From this final – and smallest – boma, the animals are loaded into trailers to soon depart to their new homes.

Before this can all happen, the boma must be ready. For this project, in addition to a few minor fence repairs, we primarily worked to affix the shade structures around the sides of each of the boma chambers. The shade structures were large sheets of shade cloth and moving padding, which we attached to the existing fence. Although it was a wild and windy day, the crew worked quickly and efficiently to get the job done. Not only does this actually provide shade for the pronghorn, but it reduces visibility through the boma chambers. Limiting visibility reduces stress and prevents the animals from trying to run through the fencing material. The pronghorn in each boma chamber cannot see beyond their own space, which helps keep them calm.

Minimizing stress is one of the most essential elements in the handling of any wildlife. As witnessed from this recent capture and translocation of Sonoran pronghorn, the use of these shaded bomas, along with the calm, caring, professional handling of each individual animal, clearly contributed to the success of this historic re-introduction project. AWF was honored to play a small part in this effort.



*September 28/29,
2021*



SONORAN PRONGHORN

BOMAS



Sonoran Pronghorn History by Any Measure *by Glen Dickens VP/AAF*

When the 4am alarm went off, it took me a moment to figure out where my spouse Betty and I were waking up. Yes, that's right, we were at the Sonoran Desert Inn located in downtown Ajo and it was the morning of December 7th, 2021. We had arrived later than we'd have liked the night before, leaving our northeast Tucson home at 5ish and crossing the Tohono O'odham Nation homelands in the dark via Highway 86. We had a 5:15am appointment to meet others at the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge headquarters parking lot. From there, we'd be led out to the endangered Sonoran pronghorn captive rearing pens for what was to become yet another successful Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) event in the recovery of this endangered species. We started the coffee pot and boiled water for our quick breakfast of oats and blueberries, then gathered up our cameras and equipment for the day. Little did Betty (our AAF crack photographer) or I know – or appreciate – what lie in store for us over the next two days.

History

Let's first take a step back and build some context for the upcoming events of that morning. The Sonoran pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana sonoriensis*) was included on the first list of endangered species in 1967 under the 1966 Endangered Species Preservation Act. It is currently listed as endangered throughout its range (without designated critical habitat) under the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA). It is also listed as an endangered species in Mexico by the Mexican Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT).

The Sonoran pronghorn is one of four extant subspecies of pronghorn, which are endemic to western North America. The first Sonoran Pronghorn Recovery Plan was completed in 1982. It was revised in 1998, and in 2002, a supplement and amendment to the 1998 Recovery Plan was published. The latest Recovery Plan revision was issued in 2015. The species' current recovery priority is 3, indicating the subspecies has a high degree of threat and a high potential for recovery.

In the summer of 2002, the U.S. population of Sonoran pronghorn was very nearly extirpated (dropping to just 19 known animals) due to the most severe drought on record in southern Arizona. The previous 20 years, the U.S.

population had averaged around 140 animals. Sonoran pronghorn in Mexico did not decline as severely that same year. In response to the near extirpation of the U.S. population, the AGFD, USFWS and other cooperating agency partners began aggressive conservation actions in the U.S., including: 1) installation of water developments; 2) construction of forage enhancement plots; 3) supplemental feeding, and; 4) captive breeding program. Management efforts were not implemented in Mexico because populations there had not declined enough to warrant them.

The captive breeding program on Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (Cabeza Prieta NWR) began in 2003, when 7 of the remaining animals were captured and placed in a 640 acre, predator proof pen on the Refuge in effort to facilitate captive breeding and re-stocking as the habitat improved. The Cabeza Prieta NWR's program has been quite successful in producing a sufficient number of animals for releases. Subsequently, the Recovery Team established a second nonessential captive experimental population (under section 10(j) of the ESA) on the Kofa NWR using pronghorn from the Cabeza Prieta NWR captive breeding pen. Apart from the breeding program, Sonoran pronghorn continue to occur on the Barry M. Goldwater Range, Organ Pipe National Monument, Yuma Proving Grounds, and the Tohono O'odham Nation. Two additional subpopulations occur as well in Mexico, primarily within the Pinacate y Gran Desierto de Altar Biosphere Reserve in Sonora, Mexico.

The U.S. Border Patrol keeps up its necessary work along the international border and has supported essential conservation endeavors underway, such as captive breeding. The Wildlife Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) Act, which is funded by hunters, provided funds to the AGFD to build 18 water catchment systems on the Cabeza Prieta and Kofa National Wildlife Refuges. The structures catch rain, collect it underground, and let the water gravity-feed to a lower point where wildlife can drink it. This has been markedly successful in improving the fate of Sonoran pronghorn. The larger of the catchments can collect enough water during summer monsoons to store and deliver water for pronghorn until they are replenished when rain falls the following summer.

Population monitoring continues on the ground and in the air. In the last week of November 2021, 161 animals were observed from the air, resulting in a minimum population estimate of 232 pronghorn in the wild. Some animals carry radio transmitters to aid in ground monitoring. Captive breeding continues as well, and as of December 8, 2021 there are 72 pronghorn presently in the two captive rearing pens at Cabeza Prieta NWF and another 26 housed at Kofa.

Capture Day #1

We arrived at Refuge Headquarters at 5am and continued to drink our morning coffee. The crowd was small, and when I got out to join the group, there was mostly awkward silence with folks trying to figure out who was who in the darkness. I recognized no one. The limited conversation was mostly about long-term Refuge Manager Sid Sloan's pending retirement party that coming Friday. Then, promptly at 5:15am, a USFWS truck pulling a trailer swept into the parking lot. The driver stepped out and announced that we should follow him! We joined the procession and headed due west in the dark on a dirt road from Highway 85. After a 30 minute drive we could see trucks pulled off on both sides of the dirt road, each with a tent in its vicinity. After multiple trucks were passed, there was a group of brightly lit trailers with small groups of people sitting around tables. We slowed down and pulled off to park. As we exited our truck in the dark, it felt like we were observing a night scene straight from the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, minus the incoming and outgoing helicopter buzz. Generators were running and people were interacting in small units. Then, we finally realized that a couple of the trailers actually formed a kitchen, which was set up to feed the dozens and dozens of hungry campers who were quickly eating their hot breakfasts as they shivered in the morning cold.

As invited guests of the AAF to photograph the event over the next 2 days, we approached the brightest lit area and were quickly recognized and welcomed by AGFD Yuma Wildlife Program Manager, John Hervert. John has been involved with Sonoran pronghorn management and recovery for 30 years and is now nearing the twilight on his wildlife career's clock. I thanked John for inviting us and asked if he could point out Jill Bright, the lead AGFD Biologist directly responsible for the success of the captive rearing program. Regular readers of the *Pronghorn* will recognize Jill Bright's name as the author of the Sonoran pronghorn report included in each quarterly issue over these many years. John led us over to a diminutive lady counseling a small group of people who were listening intently. As it was my first time to finally (after 11 years on the AAF Board!) put a face with Jill's name, I approached her with a sideways hug and exclaimed, "Jill, you're famous amongst all of our quarterly *Pronghorn* readers!" She gave a broad, shy smile and took a hard look at who in fact Glen Dickens, retired AGFD, was for herself. It was a fun moment for two biologists (to whom pronghorn were at the center of our mutual interests and expertise for much of our lives) to be meeting for the first time.

It was clear that everyone present, and among the small groups, knew one another and what was at hand. A loud call was made by one of the team leaders. Everyone snapped to attention as we were told to fall in behind a number of lead vehicles and proceed to the south captive rearing pen. We were also advised to keep our voices low and only speak when absolutely necessary during the entire pronghorn processing. We joined the rear of the procession and the sun began to crack the eastern sky (in exactly the wrong direction from where my built-in GPS had it after the 30 minutes of twists and turns in the dark drive to the campsite). A bit disconcerting but rapidly forgotten as we arrived at the east end of the south pen and realized just how many vehicles had preceded us as the morning light grew. We parked well out of the way and walking towards the three tall Bomas (see the article and photos by Trica Oshant Hawkins included in this issue to understand their utility in the capture process). We then realized there were up to 50 personnel present, including volunteers and staff from the AGFD, USFWS, Border Patrol, private veterinarians, and seasoned Yuma area volunteers and drivers.

Tables replete with GPS collars, drugs, and syringes were being attended to by veterinarian technicians. Pronghorn processing tables were set up under the pop-up canopies and a team of some 20 "muggers" all assembled outside the door of the closest Boma. Each mugger held a cloth net with which to entangle the pronghorn that had been moved into the nearest Boma. All of these activities occurred inside the safety of the large captive rearing pasture in case of escapees from the processing zone. There were three basic steps to what was about to happen next and multiple times until all the pronghorns were processed: 1) mugging (capturing and containing a pronghorn); 2) processing (which includes collaring, temperature, blood draw, fecal sample, and calming drugs) and; 3) loading (either into the transport trailers or re-released into the large captive rearing pasture). *Note: Photos of all of these steps included with this article give you added perspective of the morning's activities.*

With everything prepped, the first set of muggers lined up and with raised hands and no talking and rushed into the Boma door. They were greeted by jumping and leaping pronghorn intent on not being caught, but failing as each animal was captured by multiple muggers. Captured pronghorn were held up off the ground and a blindfold was attached to their head. Once all animals were secured and the dust settled (they were allowed into this first Boma just 3 or 4 at a time) the second crew entered the Boma with the pronghorn processing stretchers, yes stretchers. These were your standard, military-type field stretchers, but unique in that four holes have been cut to allow for the individual pronghorn's legs to dangle down. They can thus be carried to the processing table, which was two spaced sawhorses set high enough to place the stretcher and keep the animals legs from touching the ground. Once in place, the aforementioned processing activities

occurred, with a team of 3 to 6 persons handling each individual animal. All the while, the pronghorn are doused in water to effectively cool them and keep their temperatures from rising.

You can imagine how a wild, open-plains animal, capable of running in bursts of 60 miles per hour, does not willingly submit to these steps. A few give off very loud audible howls and groans, adding a vocal dimension to the morning. Each individual pronghorn ultimately resigned to its handling, and was either loaded into one of the trailers, sporting a GPS radio collar, or re-released into the pen to continue to contribute to the propagation of the species. Six pronghorn were loaded into a transport trailer heading to Mexico, and 10 were loaded into the trailer intended for the Vekol Valley holding pen.

After my first half-hour of observation at the virtually silent, caring, and careful handling of each individual pronghorn (as if they were a patient in a hospital ICU), I became overwhelmed with emotion. I stood and openly wept, proud of every individual present and the promise that these animals held. I reflected on why I decided that wildlife management would be my chosen career at age 15. What I was observing was nothing short of the pinnacle of wildlife management required to put them back! Not a small endeavor by any metric!

Transport to Vekol Valley Holding Pen Day #1

At approximately 2pm, the transport truck and trailer with their respective 10 pronghorn passengers left the pen capture site. Our assigned duty was to be a chase vehicle. A veterinarian was in a separate truck to oversee the release of the animals and be ready to provide medical services if any of the animals might require attention after their transport. We worked our way out to Highway 85 and started north 45 miles to Gila Bend and I-8. For the first and only time in their lives the 10 pronghorn were doing 70 miles an hour! Once on I-8 we headed east 35 miles to the Vekol Valley turnoff. At the Vekol turnoff we turned south 10 miles, taking our time at all of the dips and turns. In around 20 minutes we arrived at the Vekol Valley holding pen, which had been reconstructed by Arizona Antelope Foundation and Arizona Wildlife Federation volunteers working with AGFD, USFWS, and BLM personnel on October 3rd (please see the separate article on that work-day).

The trailer was backed up to the holding pen's gate and both sides secured to eliminate the possibility of any escapees. Then, personnel from the AGFD carefully opened one side of the trailer and a couple of pronghorn hit the ground running. The next few required some coaxing to exit the trailer, as did the others in the next stall. The good news is that every single pronghorn was upright and ambulatory as they ran out into the holding pasture. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief and took umbrage in the fact that Sonoran pronghorn had been returned to the Vekol Valley in the western shadow of Antelope Peak after over a 100 years of absence!

As we started back towards the interstate, we encountered the trailer with six pronghorn that had been slated for Mexico heading southbound. There had been a technical issue with one of the import permits needed to cross the border into Mexico. After several hours of unsuccessful attempts to get the animals into Mexico, time ran out for the animal's and personnel's safety, and the trailer was consequently diverted to the Vekol Valley, where these pronghorn were instead released to join the others in the holding pen. We arrived back at the Sonoran Desert Inn around 7pm, ending the day as it had begun, in the dark... but 14 hours later. We broke out our celebratory cocktails, enjoyed microwaved local Mexican food, and hit the pillows with big Sonoran pronghorn restoration smiles on our faces.

Transport to Vekol Valley Holding Pen Day #2

Day 2 began with a much enjoyed sleep-in and pack up by 8:30am. Our plan was to meet the Vekol Valley transport trailer at Highway 85 to again provide escort services on our travels to Tucson. Seven additional pronghorn were captured earlier that morning by the capture team (a repeat of the previous day's process) for transport to the Vekol Valley holding pen. We had shot all the necessary footage for our story the previous day but this gave me an opportunity to visit with my close friend and retiring Cabeza Prieta NWR Manager, Sid Sloan. We had worked together on the Arizona Strip from 1979 to 1984, he as a BLM Wildlife Biologist and me as the AGFD Flagstaff Regional Habitat Specialist and formed a real affection and professional respect for one another. We used those six years to reintroduce desert bighorn sheep to the Paria Canyon/Vermillion Cliffs and Kanab Creek area. As time will do, our respective careers had diverged widely and we had not physically had a face to face conversation for over 20 years. What a pleasure it was to spend three hours standing by the roadside awaiting the Vekol Valley transport trailer, catching up on our lives and planning our retirement get-togethers going forward. Both of us were just as enthusiastic about Sonoran pronghorn restoration today as we had been about Arizona Strip bighorn sheep restoration while in our late 20s. Simply said, one's love and enthusiasm for wildlife is both ageless and constantly refreshing for one's being.



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At around noon, trucks began coming down the road and we waited to get behind the correct trailer and repeated the previous day's journey. This time after the trailer was backed up and secured, one of the AGFD biologists asked, "Glen, will you do the honors and open the first gate?" Breathless, I answered, "of course!" I was told to be sure and stand behind the gate as I slowly opened it, which I did. And then... nothing happened! Hmm... I was told to take a peek, and as I peeked in, the smell of pronghorn greeted my senses, and there were three pronghorn does. One sound asleep lying on her left side, one curled up on the floor calmly looking at me, and the 3rd standing upright leaning on the trailer wall facing away from me, also in a slumber. They appeared to be in utter bliss and very much enjoying the injection of cocktails they had been given earlier that morning. It was so pleasing to be that close to them and to observe their calm demeanors. At this time, Noah Ratcliff of the AGFD, opened up the front door slightly to elicit some response and they came to life. They jumped to their feet and bolted out of the trailer, bounding away to join the herd of 16 off in the distance that had approached to greet the arrival of their new pen mates. The remaining four pronghorn bucks came out of the other side of the trailer without incident and posed for a group photograph after exiting the trailer before bounding off after the three does. We all shared smiles and high fives and began our journey home with a deep sense of wildlife contentment.

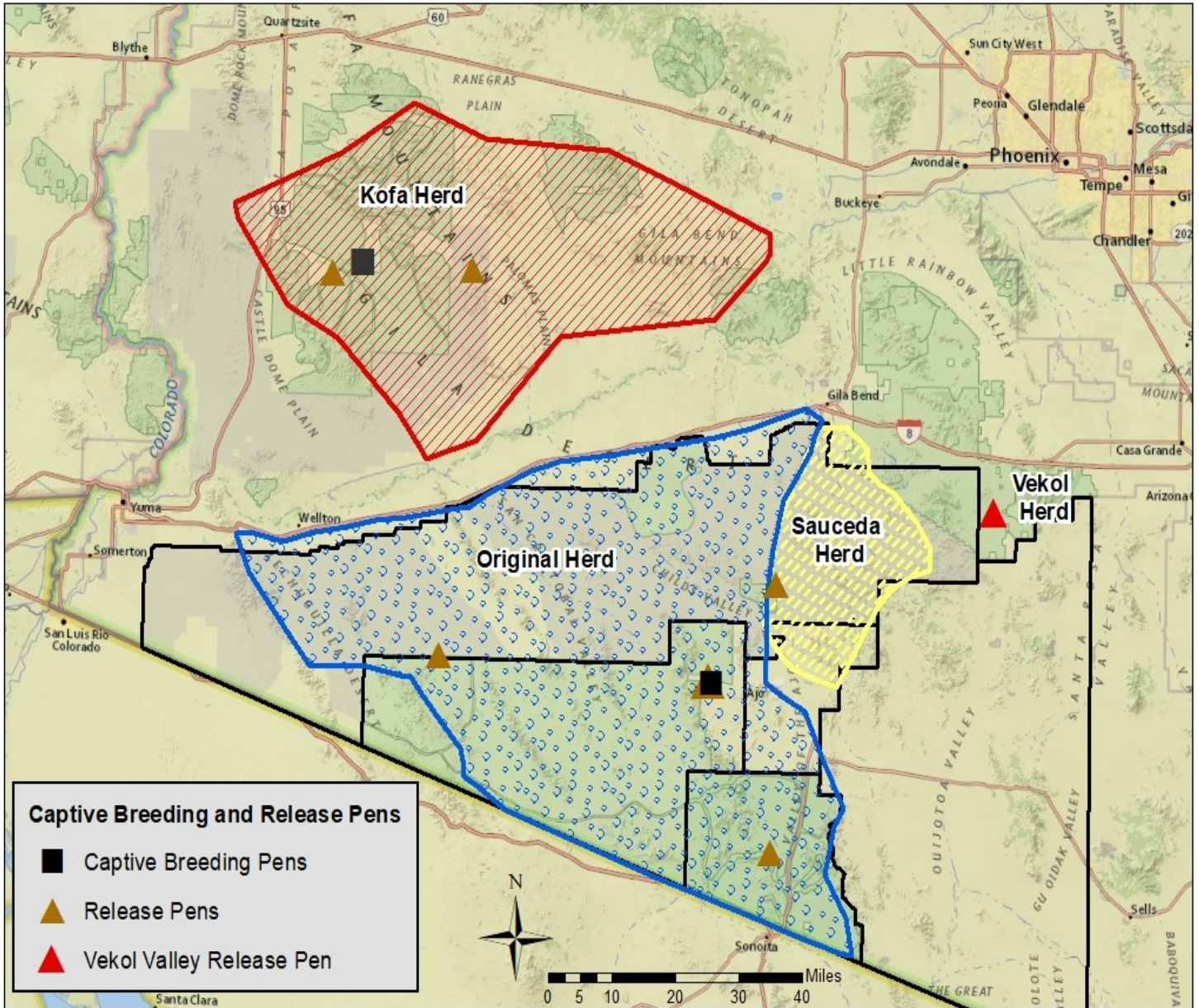
Photo courtesy Ken Cook



From L-R— Top row— morning vehicles; capture tower & morning staging; capture building processing area; Row 2—morning prep activity; pre-entry boma wranglers; processing boma with AZGFD vet and muggers; Row 3—capture team processing; attaching collar; hardware: collars and tags; re-releasing into pen transport on cot; re-release into pen; a healthy Sonoran Pronghorn

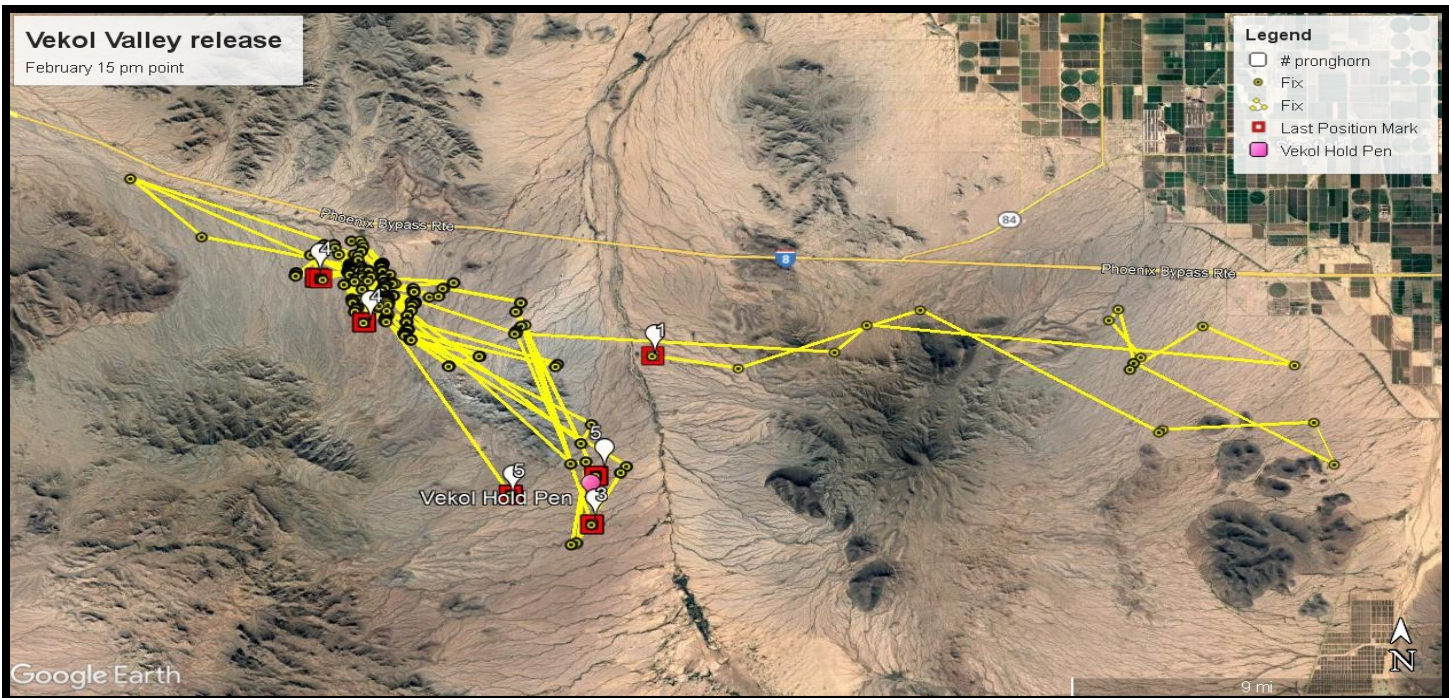


SONORAN PRONGHORN CAPTIVE BREEDING AND RELEASE PENS



Sonoran Pronghorn Release Team Celebrating Successful January 14, 2022 Release





Vekol Valley Sonoran Pronghorn Reintroduction Team Cheerleaders

Jill Bright, Sonoran Pronghorn Biologist
 John Hervert, Wildlife Program Manager
 Glen Dickens, AAF Vice President
 Dr. Anne Justice-Allen, AZGFD Veterinarian

MY PERSPECTIVE- SONORAN PRONGHORN MANAGEMENT & RESTORATION

**BY JOHN HERVERT-YUMA WILDLIFE PROGRAM MANAGER
ARIZONA GAME & FISH DEPARTMENT**

I remember the first time I heard the words Sonoran pronghorn. It was 1984 and I was a newly minted Arizona Game and Fish Department Wildlife Manager stationed in Yuma Arizona. I had never heard of a Sonoran pronghorn so naturally I thought this older guy was playing a prank on me. I kept my mouth shut and went along with it rather than confirm how little I actually knew on the subject. How did I get through a university education without learning about this unique sub-species of pronghorn found here in Arizona I wondered? I soon found out why this was not a topic of my education. Almost nothing was known about them, at least in academia or published literature.

It did not take long before I had my first opportunity to be involved with managing Sonoran pronghorn. I was asked to help capture 10 Sonoran pronghorn and fit them with radio collars. I was new to aerial net gunning, but I thought when asked to serve as a gunner, why yes thinking to myself, I would do this for free. This project was being conducted out of our Phoenix headquarters; Contracts section run by Jim deVos. This was one of the first studies conducted on Sonoran pronghorn. After seeing these animals in the wild and actually getting to handle them, I was hooked.

I developed professional relationships with Fish and Wildlife personnel working on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife refuge attempting to get something started with active implementation of the Recovery Plan and joined the recovery team after it was reconstituted (disbanded in the 1980's) and found willing partners interested in making progress with implementing a census method. We experimented with aircraft flying at different altitudes and speeds until we settled on an optimal for each given the habitat and species with which we were working. I wanted a method that was repeatable from year to year and would yield reliable results that we could gauge our active management success or failures with. The aerial surveys we conduct are rare in the sense that the data set now spans 30 years of time using the same fundamental approach (altitude, speed and intensity).

The next step for us involved more capture operations, collaring Sonoran pronghorn. We were challenged by the large study area, over a million acres, much of which was controlled by the military and off limits to us except occasionally over weekends. The "we" I refer to include the Game Specialist and Wildlife Area Manager; both were shanghaied on occasion to work on Sonoran pronghorn. We soon found out pronghorn roam over large areas from day to day, making it hard to find them to collect information we needed. As a consequence of these limitations, we focused our efforts on weekly aerial telemetry flights, usually conducted Sunday mornings when the military was taking the day off from training. Sonoran pronghorn were ideal study subjects using this method. They are generally found in the open, can be counted and classified easily using image stabilized binoculars. Habitat preference and even the forage they are eating can be determined from the air.

We spent the next decade following pronghorn from the air, documenting survival, death, recruitment, habitat use and movements. We wrote reports detailing the results of our studies, including the high levels of mortality experienced during prolonged periods of drought. During this time we requested permission to experiment with water development and supplemental feeding in the hopes of reducing the impacts of drought. We could not find support for these proposals unfortunately. Regarding water use by Sonoran pronghorn, it was generally accepted that these animals did not drink water based on the lack of observations of this behavior around waters established in pronghorn habitat. During one of our Sunday morning flights, we noted how frequently we were seeing a group of 10-15 pronghorn near a hill used for dropping high explosive bombs. We wondered why pronghorn would be attracted to a habitat so altered by this activity. During one of the many circles we made above the pronghorn, Laura Thompson, a Fish and Wildlife biologist noticed water in a bomb crater nearby the pronghorn group we were tracking. That same day Bob Henry, our Game Specialist and I drove out to the site to install trail cameras and telemetry data loggers. The data loggers would allow us to determine how often the radio collared pronghorn visited the site and how long they stayed. The trail cameras at this time only used 35mm film, so we expected the film to run out quickly. While we were there, the pronghorn returned to the water, walked around us, seemingly without fear and drank water right before our eyes! One myth busted. We documented the use of this accidental water over a period of several weeks, well into the summer. Eventually it went dry and the herd broke apart and scattered, migrating south into chain fruit cholla fields. This may seem like a small step in our learning process, but it is hard to describe the opposition to the idea we met from environmental groups and agency personnel alike. I recall taking a skeptic on a flight over the bomb crater to show him what we were seeing. As we flew over, I pointed to a pronghorn that was standing in the water. My passenger said, "Yeah but is it drinking?" The discussion soon moved to other arguments. Do pronghorn benefit? What are the unintended consequences of water development? How is water development compatible with wilderness doctrine, at least within the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge?

This experience helped us focus on providing answers and data to the arguments against active management. For example, we conducted a coyote study to investigate how coyotes may benefit from water development and how their range and movements may be influenced. The data we collected yielded interesting insights regarding coyotes and how agriculture influences coyote movements but yielded nothing to support the claims that water somehow was making more coyotes. Another product of our investigations was the consequence of military related alterations to habitat from accidental fires, target construction, disturbance associated with bombs and munitions churning up the surfaces and altering plant communities found on the gunnery range. All of these alterations resulted in far more than expected use of these areas by Sonoran pronghorn. Some of these findings were unexpected due to the general acceptance that Sonoran pronghorn were dependent on large areas without humans and human related disturbance. One of the early challenges we faced while conducting our investigations concerned gaining the trust of our partners within the military community. Initially we were looked upon with suspicion and that we were out to curb military training. Over time, we were able to build relationships and trust with the military in part because we always stuck to what the data suggested and only supported proposals that could be supported with facts. Eventually, these efforts would pay dividends. The project changed significantly in 1998 when we hired a full time biologist (Jill Bright) dedicated to Sonoran pronghorn. Initially, we used funding from our military partners to pay for the position. With Jill's help the project expanded into areas of study that were not possible before. A great deal of time was dedicated to investigating the seasonal forage selection of Sonoran pronghorn. Many days were spent collecting fresh fecal samples for analyses using micro histological examinations. The indigestible leaf surface is unique in pattern to each species of plant. Our reports were better and contained more science, however other agencies were still not moving forward with implementation of active management.

Prior to 2002, we had witnessed a number of years that were not favorable to fawn recruitment and a couple of years when there was an alarming level of adult mortality. Rains would eventually stem the level of adult deaths; however late rains often fell too late to save any fawns because they were all dead already. Understanding Sonoran pronghorn population dynamics (numbers going up or down) is not very complicated. It's all about rain and timing of rain seasonally. Sonoran pronghorn can be characterized as a boom and bust species. Most years are bust, but hopefully you get that one really good year and the herd doubles in number. However the next four or five years in a row may be suboptimal, with steady declining numbers. We could see we were assuming rains would fall often enough to keep the population viable. The years 2001 and 2002, would prove to be a pivot point.

Arizona experienced a statewide drought that may have been the worst on record since 1400's. Most of the Sonoran pronghorn range went without rainfall for a year. One area on the Marine Range received enough spring rains for forage to be produced. Desert species of browse simply drop all leaves during drought leaving little for forage that pronghorn can digest. Early in 2002, the process of starvation began for most Sonoran pronghorn. By the time rains fell in September of that year, we estimate 80% of the herd had died. We cannot be sure, but I believe the lucky pronghorn that used the green area, while it lasted on the Marine range, were in better condition longer than the pronghorn that eventually died. I also believe the remaining pronghorn could have all died within a few weeks if the rains had not come. The few remaining pronghorn were literally skin and bones.

The result of the drought of 2001-2002 was a realization that Sonoran pronghorn could actually go extinct without active management. The Recovery Team was given approval to build and operate a captive breeding facility, construction of small waters, and the construction and operation of wells to be used to produce native forage during periods of drought. All of these projects have proven to be successful in restoring pronghorn numbers to near record levels and allowing the Recovery Team to reestablish pronghorn in historic habitats north of Interstate 8 and east of Highway 85. We enjoy having established two new populations in Arizona and expanding the distribution of Sonoran pronghorn substantially as well. We have built 21 water developments and drilled three new wells for Sonoran pronghorn. There are well over 400 Sonoran pronghorn in the wild in Arizona currently.

I would like to claim we are well on the road to down listing and eventually delisting this unique subspecies; however I know there remains many challenges that must be met first. We are currently testing new areas attempting to determine if pronghorn can maintain themselves without augmentation from the captive breeding pens. We need a year with both spring and summer rains to be able to judge if recruitment of fawns can exceed losses of adults to predation, possible disease and accidents. We need to constantly reevaluate how we spend our limited resources (both personnel time and funding) to ensure we are getting the most for our efforts. This is a difficult challenge given we cannot predict the weather. We spent a great deal of time in 2021 providing water and supplemental feed to a portion of the wild herd. I am optimistic we can adapt to changing conditions, much like the Sonoran pronghorn, as long as we stay agile in our approach and make the necessary moves in management. I am also optimistic that our military and Department of Homeland Security partners will continue to support our efforts with funding and with on the ground assistance implementing recovery actions.

Photos on page 16



Two AZGFD Wildlife Professionals Who Have Made a Life's Work on The Sonoran Pronghorn Effort



MY PERSPECTIVE—SONORAN PRONGHORN MANAGEMENT & RESTORATION

BY JILL BRIGHT, SONORAN PRONGHORN BIOLOGIST—ARIZONA GAME & FISH DEPARTMENT

I started my lengthy career with pronghorn in 1993 working part time and doing my master's degree in northern Arizona on a project studying American pronghorn with the National Park Service and Arizona Game and Fish. This is where I first met Richard Ockenfels, who was working on the project, and he taught me many of the field techniques for studying pronghorn. He also helped me produce ideas for my master's degree project. He continued to mentor me, and later helped me get part time work with Game and Fish on their state-wide pronghorn habitat study. After finishing my degree, and a short stint on the black-footed ferret project, I moved to Yuma to work on Sonoran pronghorn.

I remember the first time I saw a Sonoran pronghorn. I was out in the Mohawk Valley with my supervisor John Hervert, within the first few days of arriving in Yuma. We were standing in chest high creosote bush looking out over a sea of creosote. I thought John was daft – there would never be pronghorn in this type of thick habitat. Then I thought maybe it was some kind of test, so I played along, looking with my binoculars into the creosote, wondering how long before I should mention to my new supervisor that this was a ridiculous place to look for pronghorn. What was he testing? Was he trying to see how long I would stand in the blazing July sun staring at nothing? I was beginning to question my decision to take this job. Soon to my utter shock, he motioned that there were some pronghorn in the distance. I still did not believe him; and thought he's really going all in with this charade. But then, I did finally see them – and what an amazing view that was. You could barely see them moving through the tall creosote. I knew right then that I had a lot to learn about Sonoran pronghorn, despite having studied American pronghorn for 5 years.

The first years were mostly research oriented studying movements, habitat use, recruitment, and patterns related to rainfall and forage conditions, with lots of aerial monitoring and surveying. The population was around 140 and declining when I arrived in 1998. However, federal land management agencies were reluctant to try any sort of active management to increase their numbers, especially in the areas designated as wilderness, which was a large part of their range. Then the drought of 2002 came. By the end of the summer, I dreaded doing the weekly aerial telemetry flights, because every week, week after week, we would find another radio collared animal dead. Upon investigating on the ground, they were not killed by predators, but had died from lack of forage and water. One of the last ones crossed Highway 85 in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, which was undocumented at the time, desperately looking for better conditions; unfortunately, she perished as well. By the time the rains finally came, we had one collared pronghorn left, and estimate we lost 80% of the herd, leaving about 21 Sonoran pronghorn left in the United States.

While devastating, this horrific decline did spur the land management agencies to slowly start to accept that some forms of management were necessary. Our first idea was to build waters specifically designed for pronghorn in habitat pronghorn use in the summer. However many people believed Sonoran pronghorn were perfectly adapted to the desert and did not need free standing water. Some biologists even told me that Sonoran pronghorn would not drink water even if it was available. Part of this was due to the fact that pronghorn had not been documented using deer, sheep or cattle waters on and around Cabeza Refuge; however, these were all located in areas too rough, too thickly vegetated, or otherwise unsuitable for pronghorn. John Hervert, I, and two very unlucky summer interns decided to backpack 5-gallon containers of water into the wilderness in 100+ degree temperatures in areas we believed would be used by pronghorn this time of year. We filled up simple Rubbermaid containers and within days, our cameras recorded pronghorn use. On more than one occasion, while packing more water to the containers, we were met by thirsty pronghorn, including young fawns. Having dispelled that myth, we were finally able to slowly start building waters, albeit still with much reluctance and unwillingness from some agencies and NGOs. But we have built over 20 pronghorn waters now, and most are used regularly by numerous wild pronghorn in the summer.

The population slowly started to increase, and we began our captive breeding program on Cabeza NWR, bringing breeding stock from the larger population in Sonora Mexico as well as a few from the Arizona population in 2004. This program evolved with years of trial and error, constantly adjusting our feeding and irrigating protocols, and improving the pen infrastructure as we experienced rare predator intrusions and monsoon flooding. One year we had a very heavy monsoon rain during the night. Our technicians rushed out in the early morning, driving through washes that were still running, worried that some of the pronghorn may have been able to escape if the pen fences were badly damaged or washed away. They found several washes at the pen had flooded badly, destroying the fences and leaving the pen vulnerable. However, they needn't have worried about pronghorn escaping, none did; in fact, a wild buck released years before actually decided life was easier in the pen and rejoined the captive herd!

Despite the difficulties of managing the Cabeza pen and constantly adapting our techniques, we have been successful with the original pen, and were able to start a second captive breeding program on Kofa NWR in 2011, bringing Sonoran pronghorn back to this historic habitat after their absence for close to a century.

Our methods and efforts to release pronghorn out of the pens have also evolved and improved dramatically. In the first few years, starting in 2006, we attempted to dart pronghorn in the pen and then release them just outside the pen, we attempted to move them into separate sections of the pen, open gates and let them leave on their own (which they did not want to do), we used helicopters to move them to areas further away from the pen, and also tried regular trailers to transport them. These efforts were not effective, and were time consuming, and expensive.

In addition, the mortality rate of released pronghorn was unacceptably high due to the handling and transporting methods. It's always a joy to release animals out into the wild, but some years the results were not what we would like. In the early years, when we would release pronghorn right out of the captive breeding pen, mortalities were often high. We suspected the animals would remain near the pen where they were comfortable and become easy prey for coyotes who could use the pen to essentially trap them – running them towards the pen fences from the outside. One year, we released 4 bucks who moved north towards Interstate 8 and the agricultural areas. We lost track of one of them, not being able to hear him on our telemetry flights after that. At the time, GPS collar technology was in its infancy, and we had to fly over the animals and manually download the data from the collars on a laptop in the plane. Several months later, we were doing telemetry in Mexico, and found that missing buck! When we downloaded his collar, we could see he had traveled west nearly to Yuma, then south into Mexico, crossing a busy highway in Mexico, and joined a herd in the Pinarate Biosphere Reserve – a trek of about 215 miles in a little over a month. Unfortunately, the 3 bucks released with him did not go with him and all drowned within 2 days of each other in the Palomas Canal in May of that year. We knew we had to improve on our release methods.

We changed our methods, built the capture bomas in the pens, and purchased specialized trailers to move the pronghorn. We adapted to the boma capture method in 2009, and over the years, our annual boma captures and releases from both pens have become somewhat of a well-oiled machine; we have handled and released hundreds of pronghorn into the wild with very little mortality or serious injury. Releases have taken place in three areas in the original herd's range (Organ Pipe Cactus NM, BMGR-W and near the captive pen), as well as several areas of unoccupied historic habitat such as Kofa NWR, the Palomas Plains, the Air Force Range east of Highway 85, and now Vekol Valley. (See page 12 , Captive Breeding and Release Pens.)

Our successes have been slow with challenges and setbacks along the way. We would not have been so successful without the extremely hard work of a long line of dedicated wildlife technicians working at our captive breeding pens and on our other recovery projects over the years. To me, the rewards from the Sonoran pronghorn program are well worth the effort. I will always remember after we began releasing pronghorn on Kofa NWR, members of the public started coming into our Yuma office to tell us how surprised and thrilled they were that they saw Sonoran pronghorn while recreating on the Kofa Refuge. Hopefully soon the public will be able to see and enjoy pronghorn while recreating in the Sonoran Desert National Monument.



Jill, leading the capture effort

VEKOL VALLEY - AZ GAME & FISH DEPARTMENT, BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT, US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE SONORAN PRONGHORN RELEASE PROJECT

BY GLEN DICKENS, VP/AAF

On Friday January 14, 2022 we held a volunteer by invitation only take down fence project of the Vekol Valley 20-acre Pronghorn holding pen. The pen had 22 resident Sonoran Pronghorn that had been released into the holding facility on both December 7 & 8, 2021. (Please see the detailed article about the capture and transfer of the pronghorn to the pen in this issue) The pen constructed of 8 foot T posts, needed the 6-foot woven wire and green screening material removed and carefully rolled up. All the while under the watchful eye of the 22 resident Sonoran Pronghorn.

We all met at the Vekol Valley campground at 8AM that morning some arriving as early as 7:30 shivering in the cold and awaiting our orientation by our Arizona Game and Fish Team Leader Jill Bright. (Please see Jill's article on her involvement in the Sonoran Pronghorn project these past 24 years in this issue). We were all very excited and privileged to be a part of the days fence work, but most importantly the expectation that as the fence was removed, the resident pronghorn would walk or run out into the open Vekol Valley and we would be witnesses. These would be the first Sonoran Pronghorn to occupy the Vekol Valley in over a century.

We did a round of jovial introductions and become better acquainted. Then we were reminded that being quiet and not speaking while working would be the order of the day, this being the same protocol used when capturing and handling the animals for transfer from the Cabeza Prieta NWF captive rearing pens. Also it was emphasized that as the sections of the fence were removed and rolled up to be sure and get the rolls squared on the ends and placed out of the washes. This so that when it had to be reinstalled in the fall of 2022 it would go smoothly. After orientation we trucked up and drove the 8 miles south to the holding pen. Jill was careful to make sure we parked well away from the pens and we all warmed up a bit on our half-mile walk to the pens gate.

Within 100 feet of the pen gate and inside was located the water trough and 2 feed bins where the pronghorn had been receiving their daily rations of timothy hay during their 5 weeks of captivity. The gate was removed and the work crews started moving in teams east, cutting holding wire, rolling up electrical wire that was used to discourage predators from digging under the fence and rolling the wire/screen sections. We had just the right number of folks for the work and it progressed rapidly. In the meantime the 22 collared, ear tagged inmates stood in a group always 200 yards away, all 44 eyes firmly fixed and studying, and likely wondering why we were so darned quiet. The unknown was twofold; 1. When would they choose to leave and 2. Would they bolt or walk between the remaining tall metal fenceposts to freedom? We got a partial answer about an hour or so into the fence removal when at the 50% mark, they ran up to the open gate corner milled around and 10 or so did walk through where the gate used to be. This response lasted about 10 minutes and then all 22 ran back to the center of the pen, stood for a few minutes then made 3 tentative walks up to the exact fence posts south boundary (reflected in the cover photo) but each time returned to the center of the pen to observe the workers removing the last half of the north fence.

A bit of pronghorn herd behavior is in order at this point. Ninety percent of the time when moving as a herd or closely bonded group such as this, it has as its group leader a single mature doe. In this case she was the one making the tentative approaches to the fence lines and then turning away. Finally at around 11AM with 70% of the fence removed she led them steadily to the east end of the pen up to the posts edge and stood fixed until 11:10 at which time the herd milled its way out walking calmly northeast towards Antelope Peak disappearing quietly into the creosote, paloverde and saguaro landscape. Free at last, 22 Sonoran Pronghorn had been returned to claim their native range, this due to the steady application of professional wildlife management techniques and resolute actions of wildlife biologists John Hervert and Jill Bright! We tip our hats to you both!

We have the following groups of folks to thank for this successful and very rewarding half day project:

- Representing the AAF Board: Ken Meadors, Darrell Tersey, Jamie Watkins & yours truly
- AAF members and volunteers: Al & Marsha Sue, Betty Dickens, Steve Rusiecki, Ken & Kathy Cook,
- AGFD: Jill Bright, Noah Ratliff, Tania Peret & Ryan Dow
- BLM: Roger Joos & Damon Haan
- USFWS: Sarah Dzielski
- Arizona Wildlife Federation: Trica Oshant Hawkins, Scott Garlid

Thanks everyone for your efforts!

See article photos page 20—photos courtesy Betty Dickens



January 14, 2022



SONORAN PRONGHORN

Yekol Valley Release



VEKOL VALLEY-BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT-AAF ANNUAL FENCE REMOVAL PROJECTS FOR SONORAN PRONGHORN

BY GLEN DICKENS, VP/AAF



The principal leaders for fence removal on Bureau of Land Management lands in the Vekol Valley, located in the Sonoran Desert Monument southwest of Casa Grande, have been BLM Area Biologists, Michael Daehler and Roger Joos. Until 2018 the AAF conducted our usual four landscape level fence projects held in April, June, August, and September. That was, until AAF VP/Project Manager Glen Dickens received a call in 2017 from Michael Daehler. Michael stated that the Vekol Valley was a candidate release site for Endangered Sonoran Pronghorn.

BLM Area Biologists, Michael Daehler and Roger Joos.

He explained that when monument designation occurred in 2000 cattle operations/grazing leases had been discontinued south of I-8 leaving at least 55 miles of unneeded fence. He also had heard through the BLM grapevine that we prided ourselves on fence modifications and removals on behalf of all of Arizona's pronghorn to improve habitat connectivity. It was an easy sell and besides, we needed at least one good "winter" project to get us out of the house and camped in the Sonoran Desert. So began our January Vekol Valley fence removal projects. To date just 17 miles have been removed so we have many, many future January projects for which you can join us and our land agency partner the Bureau of Land Management.



Vekol Valley Overview

Vekol Valley Barbed Wire By Randy Tuttle

Randy Tuttle (age 12) and his mom, Emily Bogusch, volunteered on March 13, 2021 for an Arizona Wildlife Federation (AWF) Volunteer for Wildlife habitat restoration project at the Sonoran Desert National Monument. Along with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and affiliate organization, the Arizona Antelope Foundation (AAF), AWF volunteers have been removing unneeded fence from the Vekol Valley. This to assist in the reintroduction of Sonoran Pronghorn in December of 2021. Randy and Emily helped remove 2 miles of fencing on this particular project. For Randy, that effort, along with this article, became his Bar Mitzvah project. Mazel Tov Randy!



I went to the Sonoran Desert National Monument to help remove barbed wire. In the Sonoran Desert, there are hundreds of miles of barbed wire remnants from when the land was used for ranching. This barbed wire is a hazard for desert animals. This is particularly true for pronghorn, because they do not jump the fence like other animals, they crawl under it.

For this project, I woke up at around 6:00am, and the trip took an hour and twenty minutes (I live in Phoenix, by the way). I also know that to get there you take the Circle Road and go down the dirt path (this is vital information because you probably don't want to drive in circles like we did). Once we got on the dirt path, we went very slow. If you want to go there, I suggest you use a jeep or a pickup truck. We went there in a Ford Fusion—one of those low cars—and it took a really long, long time. I think my mom was scared of popping a tire (it was pretty bumpy and took her what seemed like 10 minutes to get through an extremely small ditch ☹️). I definitely think a 4-wheel drive vehicle would be better for this trip.

Once we got there, they (AWF, AAF, AGFD, & BLM) gave us a pep talk, told us about what we were going to do, and split us into separate groups. It was a six mile ride from our meeting point to the project site. That might not seem like much, but we were going around 9 miles per hour in a low, sensitive car and you felt every single bump on the road, and my mom was worrying that it would take us an hour to get there. It didn't though, don't worry.

Once we got to the project site, they showed us where and what to cut. We got our wire cutters out and started clipping. It was nice cutting down so much wire. We were clipping these little, tiny metal wires holding the strands of barbed wire in place. Not to brag or anything, but I cut a lot of those little wires. You could probably do more, but you'll have to go there and see if you can. Sometimes the wires would be double corded. If they were, you would use one of the larger wire clippers (bolt cutters). Sometimes there was even a post which was almost completely wrapped in barbed wire. After a while, my hands and legs started to ache. We had cut a LOT of wires. We caught up to the team who started a few miles ahead of us. Then we all walked back to our starting point and ate lunch. One person (Glen Dickens) told us a story about how the AAF had recently completed a 10-year National Fish and Wildlife Foundation project to support pronghorns in southeastern Arizona and how they got money to help their organization in the Sonoran pronghorn restoration effort -- but it'd be better to hear the story from him.

By now we we'd been there for several hours (maybe two and a half) and I was pretty much spent, but I stayed to work some more. Since we were leaving soon, they gave me and my mom a small assignment. Some other people came with us and we pulled down some more fences of barbed wire and I did a big fence of barbed wire. It was one of the larger ones with thick wood posts. Overall it was pretty cool.

My mom wants me to write about what I thought was the most rewarding thing of this project. I would say it would probably be when your hands want to fall off and your legs turn to jelly and you sit down and it all just sort of cools over and feels good.

Some things you should take if you want to make this trip in the future would be gloves and protective clothing, like maybe a pair of tough jeans. It was pretty cold there so a good coat that you don't care if it might get ruined because when cutting barbed wires there might be a spikey plant that you need to walk by, or an uncomfortable position leaning over a bush that you need to lop off to reach that last piece of wire. And a water bottle because working is hard out there and as I said, it is sort of cold but even so water is essential. And that's pretty much it, the end. I hope you're coming to help in the future because I'm coming back, too one day. (Editors note, Randy and his mother did in fact return to volunteer on the AAF October 3, 2021 release pen reconstruction reported on in this issue of the *Pronghorn*)

Yay!
- Randy Tuttle

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*Jill Bright catches a moment illustrating the majesty
of this healthy Sonoran big buck.*

