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Read a full review and test of the El Lobo hunting rifle by Brian Pearce in RIFLE #257 (May/June, 2011).
With the exception of bison, that nowadays can hardly be considered “wild,” the moose is North America’s largest and certainly most impressively antlered trophy animal. Considering the vast, wilderness country in which they live, as well as the headgear worn by the largest bulls, moose are, by anybody’s standard, a truly world-class trophy.

In Recent Hunting Trips in British North America, published in 1907, iconic African hunter and explorer Frederick Courteney Selous described his 1904 and 1905 hunting trips in Canada and the Yukon. Accompanied by a similarly famous American hunter, Charles Sheldon, they hunted the far northern wilderness for caribou, sheep, grizzly, wolf and moose, which Selous describes as “a mighty-antlered prehistoric looking beast . . . a sight that once seen can never be forgotten.” He claimed that the second moose he killed on the trip, a mature 67-inch bull, was “the finest hunting trophy that has ever fallen to my rifle.” That is pretty high praise coming from a man who had previously taken innumerable elephant, rhino, lion, Cape buffalo, kudu, eland and sable during a quarter-century of hunting the Dark Continent.

Alaska and the Yukon are home to the largest species of moose in the world, and each year hundreds of hunters trek north in quest of their ultimate trophy. Many, having previously hunted only deer or elk, assume that a beast that may weigh as much as 8 or 10 average whitetail deer or twice as much as a bull elk will require a large-caliber, overbore magnum rifle. As an unrepentant rifle loony, I understand and sympathize with the need, however tenuous, to justify acquiring a new rifle. If a “once-in-a-lifetime” hunting trip to a far off land isn’t justification enough, I don’t know what is. The truth is, however, most hunters living in the north manage to harvest their yearly moose with the same calibers used by Lower 48 deer hunters.

As a species moose are circum-polar and, although their animals are smaller bodied than ours, the most popular rifle among Scandinavian hunters is the 6.5x55. In many remote parts of Canada and the Yukon, the old British .303 is still in common usage. On his Yukon hunt more than a century ago, Selous chose a single-shot .303 Holland-Farquharson in lieu of the larger .461 Gibbs-Farquharson that he used in Africa. In Alaska today the most commonly used caliber is still the ubiquitous .30-06. For all their mass, moose are quite phlegmatic, and with stout bullets and a proper heart/lung shot placement, most any caliber with the power level of the .270 Winchester, 7x57mm Mauser, .308 or .30-06 will work well.

Trophy hunters usually feel more comfortable with heavier, more powerful armament however. Because they are after the largest bulls and are usually facing time constraints,
they cannot always wait for a perfect, close-range shot. Currently the most popular calibers chosen by non-resident Alaskan hunters are one variety or another of the various .300 magnums. The particular flavor doesn’t matter as much as the bullets chosen. Moose are massive animals with large, thick skeletal structure, and their shoulder and leg bones will easily stop small-caliber bullets, as well as fast, lightly constructed bullets from the magnums. With the .300s I recommend hunters choose either a 180- or 200-grain premium bullet like the Barnes TSX, Nosler Partition or Swift A-Frame.

The .338 Winchester Magnum is another popular round for both resident and non-resident moose hunters. Its combination of a larger frontal area, combined with bullets of high sectional density moving along at substantial, distance-flattening velocities, make it one of the best and most versatile cartridges for all Alaskan game. With premium 250-grain bullets it is suitable for any animal the state has to offer. It is one of my favorites and works so well that when I was in Mozambique a few years ago I carried one while hunting Cape buffalo. They are no larger than our bull moose, and 250-grain steel jacketed Hornady solids sail completely through them.

On the next rung up the caliber ladder are the midbores like the .35 Whelen, .358 Norma and the 9.3x62. Although not as popular as the .338, they retain a substantial fan base in Alaska and are fully its equal on moose. Their large, heavy bullets drive deeply and open a massive wound channel. A bull will seldom move more than a step or two with a solid heart/lung shot from any of these calibers. My son is a devout fan of the .35 Whelen, and our close friend Marty Meierotto swears by “Bonecrusher,” his beloved .358 Norma.

Although large, moose are not considered to be dangerous game, so there is no need for rifles in the “stopping power” range. A few guides may use their .375s and .416s, but only because those are the rifles with which they are most familiar. Pragmatic rural Alaskans, who hunt close to home and are looking for smaller meat bulls, use whatever rifle they happen to own. I know rural residents who regularly kill their yearly subsistence moose with calibers as small as the .223 and .22-250 Remingtons, while others successfully stalk them with lever-action .30-30s and .45-70s. Each year there are always a number of moose taken with archery equipment and powerful handguns as well.

If your quest is for a real bragging-sized trophy bull, like the one that so impressed Selous, you will be best armed with a powerful, flat-shooting rifle in a caliber ranging from 7mm up to the 9.3mm. The choice of rifles is highly personal, but today the vast majority of hunters bring synthetic-stocked, often stainless steel, bolt-action rifles with variable-power scopes. It is hard to argue with that choice, but if your favorite deer rifle is a Remington .30-06 pump gun or a lever-action Model 99 Savage .308, then by all means bring it. If, like Selous, you prefer a single shot, they work as well now as they did then.

The single most important factor is that you bring a rifle with which you are comfortable, competent and familiar.
“Trophy Board” Submissions

Send photos to:
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Prescott, AZ 86301
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Jeffrey Lingbeck
Grand Meadow, MN
Alaska Dall Sheep

Mike Phair
Redmond, WA
Idaho Whitetail

Stephen Ward
Hilton, NY
Illinois Whitetail
The Southwest is well-known for gagger-sized pronghorn. New Mexico and Arizona routinely crank out large bucks every year. Check out Pope & Young Club and Boone & Crockett Club trophy lists, and you’ll see that the Southwest is well represented. Milder winters are often credited as one reason why southern pronghorn antelope have life a little easier than snowdrift bucks of Montana and Wyoming. Better feed in the spring and summer also helps horn growth, but the odds of drawing the best tags in these southwestern states aren’t good. There’s a secret southern state, however, that grows trophy black-faced bucks, some just as big as those in New Mexico and Arizona, and you can hunt it without the headaches of a public tag lottery. Welcome to Texas!
Two regions of the Lone Star State grow stud pronghorn. The Trans-Pecos region in far West Texas is a top destination. Hudspeth County is the top producer of B&C pronghorn entries in the state, and one of the top counties in the nation for book bucks. Other top counties in this region include Presidio, Jeff Davis and Brewster. Here you’ll find a classic desert landscape with cholla, yucca and assorted grasses. Spot-and-stalk tactics with big optics from wind-blown mesas or truck cabs is the first step. Once you find the right buck, a stalk through the prickly maze of chollas and across the plains is required. Ranches in this region are huge with pastures often measured in sections rather than acres.

The second region worth investigating is the Panhandle in North Texas. A few top counties include Dallam, Hartley, Lipscomb and Hutchinson, just to name a few. Panhandle pronghorn are scattered across a mixture of rangeland and farm country. Rolling prairie with short grasses, CRP fields, prairie dog towns, yuccas and prickly pear make for classic habitat. North Texas pronghorn have an advantage over those of the West Texas deserts. During fall and winter, pronghorn bunch up on wheat fields at the top of Texas. The bright green sprouts attract them from miles and offer a stable diet during harsh winter months.

Pronghorn have always been a part of the Texas landscape. Historical records from western explorers traveling through the Panhandle region documented prairie dog towns as far as the eye could see, herds of bison that blackened the prairie and abundant deer and antelope near the Canadian River.

In 2009 the statewide pronghorn population was estimated at 18,000 animals. In the Panhandle region, herd numbers are stable. The Panhandle supports the largest population followed by the Trans-Pecos, Rolling Plains and Edward’s Plateau. In the Trans-Pecos, numbers are declining at an alarming rate. According to biologists, the declination is attributed to multiple factors, including extended drought, predation on fawns and brush encroachment. Habitat fragmentation is another cause. The main cause for the recent decline of West Texas pronghorn is believed to be connected to a disease from a parasitic worm called the barber’s pole worm. It’s known that this parasite is detrimental in domestic sheep and goats, but its exact effects on pronghorn remain unclear. Necropsies done on Trans-Pecos pronghorn have shown high levels of these parasites in the body. So far, it’s a problem specific only to the Trans-Pecos region, and more research is being done. As a result of population numbers declining, permit numbers have decreased. Last year, only 569 buck permits were issued in the Trans-Pecos with an average utilization rate of 30 to 40 percent. Limited hunting of bucks is not a factor in the population decline. Typically, weather, natural predation and land use practices play a larger role.

Since the year 2000, Hudspeth County ranks as the fourth most productive county in the nation for B&C pronghorn entries with 51. (The top three counties over the last 10 years were all in Wyoming: Carbon, Fremont and Natrona, respectively.)

To date, Texas has produced a recorded number of 135 B&C pronghorn. The biggest Texas pronghorn on record is a giant Hudspeth County buck taken in 1994 by Walter O. Ford III. Ford’s buck scored 90 4/8 and ranks 27th all-time.

Since Texas is approximately 96 percent private.
land, with the exception of a handful of tags available through a draw on public ground, the majority of its antelope hunting is on private ranches. Texas pronghorn hunting is controlled by landowner permits. Landowners with antelope on their property request permits through the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TP&W). During the summer, TP&W biologists conduct surveys by airplane, helicopter and vehicles to estimate herd numbers for a given area and document the number of bucks seen. Using this data, permits are issued to ranches with huntable numbers of pronghorn.

Once permits have been mailed to landowners, usually in late August or early September, landowners decide what they want to do with the permits. Some ranchers choose not to use them at all or to only use some of the available tags; a conservative use of permits is typical. Other ranchers save them for friends or family. Some sell the right to hunt by way of the permit. Prices for this land access and landowner permit vary widely.

I paid $400 for my first Texas antelope permit back in 1995 and shot an 81-inch buck. More recently I’ve paid $800 to $1,350, but I know a few large ranches in West Texas that fetch $2,000 to $3,000 for their tags. You can find out where permits are available by consulting with regional TP&W biologists. I always look at a property in person, scouting for big bucks, before I commit to buying a permit. Just because a ranch has been given permits does not guarantee there’s a mature buck on the property.

For Texas residents, the only other legal requirement is a state hunting license that costs about $300. Texas’ antelope season usually lasts nine days in early October, covering two weekends. Weather is usually very pleasant this time of year, with cool mornings and warm afternoons.

Some ranchers offer hunters a place to stay on the ranch and semi-guided hunts, with ranch cowboys serving as guides to point hunters in the right direction. Others offer nothing more than a map of the ranch and the combination to the gate. Expenses like hotel, food and meat care are all do-it-yourself. Fully guided hunts are also an option. Several outfitters buy landowner permits, then offer their guiding services to help find a big buck. Food and lodging are included as is field care of your trophy. Cost for these hunts is usually $2,500 to $4,500.

Hunting Texas pronghorn can be challenging and exciting. Last season Ty Bartoskewitz and I glassed a tall, heavy buck trailing does just across the fence on land we could not hunt. On our side of the fence, a herd of five does and three small bucks stared through the barbed wire at the neighbors. As if we had willed it, the big buck left his harem of does and bee-lined toward the fence line and the small herd 400 yards in front of us.

Ty grabbed his .270 while I unfolded a decoy. We dodged behind a small hill, keeping track of the

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**Realistic Expectations**

Sure, everyone wants a Booner buck, but the reality is, even on prime dirt in Texas, record-book bucks are rare. Mature bucks with horns 14 inches or better aren’t everywhere, but if you cover some ground, you’ll find one. With a little luck, 15- and 16-inch bucks are possible. Last year friends and I bought permits for a 35,000-acre ranch in the Panhandle. We each paid $1,350 for the right to hunt by way of the permit. The rancher let us stay on the ranch in a nice bunkhouse, complete with kitchen, bathrooms and beds. We hunted on our own, cooked for ourselves and dressed game ourselves. Of the seven bucks we shot, the largest was a heavy-horned stud with 15½-inch horns that scored right at 80 inches. We took several others in the mid-70s and one 13-incher. We left lots of promising bucks for next year and never did find the biggest buck the rancher had told us about. After tags were filled, we shot prairie dogs while making plans to do it again this year. That’s a realistic expectation for a fun hunt in Texas.
fast-approaching buck at the fence. When he ducked under, he galloped toward the herd, chasing small bucks like a coyote after a rabbit. Seizing the moment, we ducked behind the small antelope buck decoy and started toward the herd at a slow walk. At 200 yards we stopped to evaluate the visiting buck’s horns more closely.

The wind was blowing a gale, so we wanted a closer shot, and again, the buck read the script. He stopped chasing long enough to recognize the new intruder, us, and began to walk steadily toward the decoy. At 75 yards, he started to get nervous, pacing back and forth.

“Shoot him when he turns,” I said to Ty. “Shoot him now!”

At the blast, the buck dropped. The others stared for a moment, then charged over the hill.

I used the same decoy one more time, as a herd of 10 antelope fed in an open wheat field. Using the contour of the hill, and staying hidden behind the silhouette decoy, my 17-year-old cousin Alan Corrigan and I walked like ducks toward the herd buck. Once we crested the hill, they spotted us. As they stared at the fake pronghorn, we closed the gap another 100 yards before they got nervous.

“That lead doe is getting antsy,” I told Alan. “Rest your gun on these sticks, and I’ll range the distance.”

It was 270 yards. The buck dropped at the shot. We tagged two other bucks out on the wheat field, including an 80-incher and one with 75-inch horns.

I later glassed a herd of four antelope from a distance, three does and one fine buck, just as the sun was chinning itself over the horizon. Ty and I ditched the truck, donned backpacks and ducked into a deep ravine below a windmill pond. Using the contour of the ravine, we cut the half-mile gap in half before slowly cresting the mesa at the end of the yucca-covered ravine. As I was searching the group for the buck, his black mask and horns popped out of the tall grass on the left flank from the does at roughly 180 yards. He was looking into the waking sun, but he’d obviously caught my movement.

With my .25-06 cradled across a set of tripod-legged shooting sticks, I cranked the Leupold up to 10x. The cross wires of my .25-06 sat steady just behind the crease of the buck’s shoulder, and when the shot rang out, the buck went down hard.

It’s no secret Texas has lots to offer deer hunters, but what surprises some big game hunters are the other endless opportunities in the Lone Star State. If you love to hunt pronghorn and don’t want to gamble your potential fall hunt on the long odds of drawing a tag, consider Texas. It’s a secret worth sharing.

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Top Ten States by B&C Pronghorn Entries

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<th>State</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
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<td>New Mexico</td>
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