

Pronghorn
August 17, 2017 Wyoming

Skillet song "One Day Too Late"

Tick tock hear the clock countdown
Wish the minute hand could be rewound
So much to do and so much I need to say
Will tomorrow be too late?

Feel the moment slip into the past
Like sand through an hourglass
In the madness I guess I just forget
To do all the things I said

Time passes by
Never thought I'd wind up
One step behind
Now I've made my mind up

Today I'm gonna try a little harder
Gonna make every minute last longer
Gonna learn to forgive and forget
'Cause we don't have long, gonna make the most of it

Today I'm gonna love my enemies
Reach out to somebody who needs me
Make a change, make the world a better place
'Cause tomorrow could be one day too late

Tick tock hear my life pass by
I can't erase and I can't rewind
Of all the things I regret the most I do...
wish I'd spent more time with you

Here's my chance for a new beginning
I saved the best for a better ending
And in the end I'll make it up to you, you'll see
You'll get the very best of me

Your time is running out
You're never gonna get it back
Make the most of every moment
Stop saving the best for last!



"Let me see, should I wear Crocs or tennis shoes on the hunt today? What an odd question!" I chuckled to myself. Then again this hunt was different than any of my previous adventures. It had begun when I read an online forum post "Anyone have preference points for Wyoming pronghorn?" Intrigued, I opened the thread and quickly realized that the initial post was by an acquaintance I'd known for a dozen years or more. We'd never actually met or hunted together, but we'd exchanged hunting stories and information many times over the years. When I found out it was Scott "Scoot" seeking bowhunters with preference points (system that Wyoming uses to delegate hunting tags via lottery) I immediately contacted him for more details.

After hearing the tentative plan everything sounded almost too good to be true. An avid bowhunter named Jeff with years of experience in the area organizes an annual archery hunt for pronghorn. He identifies waterholes and places blinds for hunters. If drawn all we had to do was show up and hunt. On top of that nobody over the years (decades?) had ever failed to kill a buck. Too easy? It certainly sounded so, but bowhunting is so darn tough how could I look a gift horse, er pronghorn, in the mouth?

Our group of five applied and drew tags together. Scoot, his 12-year old son Ryan, Scott's brother Rod & their good friend Jon plus me. It fit my schedule best to head to Wyoming early to meet Jeff and his friend Cody and get lined out with the location of the four blinds over the weekend. The Minnesota crew would arrive Monday when Jeff was back at work and I'd in turn help show them around, and Tuesday we'd begin hunting before daylight. None of us had ever taken a pronghorn before and in fact this would be Ryan's first trip "out west".

With a lot of windshield time during my drive north I had plenty of time to think. Not long before the pronghorn season a bowhunting friend of mine had tragically passed away. I believe he was the very first bowhunter I met after moving to New Mexico and far too young to leave this life. My heart was broken when I heard the news and his memorial service was a sober reminder that none of us are getting out alive. When Switchfoot's song "One Day Too Late" came up in rotation on my truck stereo the lyrics hit me like a brick. None of us knows what day will be our last, yet most of us avoid thinking about it. What's next? Is it just "poof" into nothing? Or is there an eternity to consider? The pastor at my friend's memorial nailed it beautifully: we need to spend time now planning for our future. Not just for family that remains behind, but our future. I wished that I had spent more time sharing my faith with friends like you all and even more with the one that had just passed from this life. *Tomorrow could be one day too late...*

I arrived in Wyoming midmorning on Saturday and met Jeff and Cody. We had an enjoyable drive throughout part of the hunting unit and spotted pronghorn in various areas. It was fun to meet them and share stories of their past hunts in the area, other hunts with family and kids, and get to know each other. I quizzed them for any tidbits that might help us be successful, but by far the most important was the time and effort that Jeff had put in beforehand setting up the blinds. We all hoped for dry weather, but as we drove they pointed out areas with terrain and vegetation conducive to spot-and-stalk hunting should the forecast take a turn for the wetter. At the end of the day they headed for home, leaving me to set up camp and explore the area for a couple of days prior to season.

On Sunday I decided to sit in one of the blinds with my camera to see what we might expect. After sleeping in I didn't get to the blind until midafternoon, but parked the truck behind a small hill and carefully glassed the water before charging into view. Yikes - I spied a good buck a few hundred yards out and making a beeline for the water! As I watched he drank his fill, and then disappeared across the prairie. I glanced toward the water again to find another buck already drinking. This was shaping up to be action-packed! When the second buck moved off I hustled to the blind and quickly settled in with my camera ready.



Buck watering as I glassed the blind

My afternoon was filled with numerous pronghorn plus a badger coming to the water. The antelope were extremely alert when they approached. Jeff and Cody recommended not moving a muscle until they had settled in and put their heads down to drink in earnest. They also stressed the importance of wearing all black, at least from the waist up, to conceal movement inside the darkened blind. Watching the actions of numerous antelope from the blind was extremely beneficial and I did my best to relay the information to the Minnesota crew when I shared photos from my scouting sit with them.



Cute fawns drinking – most does appeared to have twins



Some of the pronghorn waded right into the mud to drink!



Dandy bucks that anyone in our party would be thrilled to take



More solid bucks



A few more good bucks

Action at the waterhole was sporadic: brief 1 to 10 minute periods of excitement separated by random intervals of anticipation and boredom. The problem was one never knew when something might show up so I found myself always on the edge of my seat wondering if it was ok to move, stretch, scratch my nose, sneeze or eat a snack. I'm not aware that I ever spooked animals away, but several times I was caught in awkward positions or with food or drink in hand and had to freeze when the wary animals suddenly appeared and stared toward the blind. We would need to be very careful during dawn-to-dusk sits while actually hunting.



Best buck I saw during my scouting sit – a definite “shooter” in my book!



Mister badger paid me a visit during my scouting sit and hunts – very neat to see!



Young doe

The blinds were located on two different roads, two apiece, and our party of 5 only had 2 vehicles. We had agreed in advance that I'd drop off one hunter, while Scoot & his son would sit together at a blind and carpool with another from their party.

Scoot and his crew graciously offered to give me the pick of blinds since I had arrived early to get dialed in, but I insisted that we put Ryan in the best blind. Of all our group I most wanted the young man to succeed. This decision set up a chain of logistics that dictated where each of us would sit opening day. Rod would drop Scoot and Ryan at Little Deep Hole and he would continue to Bubbles. As the other driver I would take Jon to Drop

Horn and continue to The Wallow. Jeff and Cody indicated that typically there was more action at Little Deep and Bubbles, but Drop Horn & The Wallow had the potential for bigger bucks. The Wallow, similar to 2 of the other blinds, was just a small seep surfacing in the middle of an otherwise dry, seemingly barren grassland.



The Wallow

On Monday we were a little pressed for time after their arrival and setting up camp so I ended up only showing them Bubbles and Little Deep. Jon didn't need to see Drop Horn since I'd take him there and I knew how to get to The Wallow. All but Jon's blind had reasonable cell service so we could keep each other up to date via text messages, which added a little spice to the hunt since we were all rooting for Ryan to fill his tag.

The forecast called for a chance of rain, which could douse, no pun intended, the activity at a waterhole. That evening we saw rain clouds and occasional lightning around us, but it seemed that the rain had skirted our immediate area. Jon indicated that 11pm held the highest chance for showers, but the weather looked good when we retired to our tents. During the night I was awakened by a pitter-patter on my tent – rats! I silently hoped it would be short-lived but it continued on and off for nearly half an hour. The ground had been so dry that I held out hope that the precipitation wouldn't been enough to form puddles and reduce the need for antelope to visit our designated waterholes.

My alarm chimed early. Based on the central location of our campsite it would take me well over an hour to reach my blind, which was the farthest, and take Rod about 40 minutes to reach his. Which brings me to my initial question as I began dressing: tennis shoes or Crocs? I would need to walk about ¼ mile from where I parked the truck. Piece of cake compared to most other hunts, but stumbling across the prairie in the dark might prove tricky in Crocs, so if the tennis shoe fits...

After dropping off Jon I didn't have much time to spare but got settled into my blind before dawn. I had a few minutes to let my eyelids droop, but as it got light enough to shoot I was on full alert. An hour later, just about the time I began to relax my vigilance, a doe and fawn suddenly appeared. I held still and watched them approach and drink. Although our tags were valid for any antelope, each of us intended to hold out for a buck.

The pair moved away soon after slaking their thirst. Just as Jeff and Cody had told me, and as I had witnessed during my scouting sit, once antelope finish drinking they rarely stick around long: often immediately walking or trotting well out of archery range. My first encounter on opening day was a good sign and a relief that antelope would still be hitting the waterholes despite the overnight shower.

I began receiving texts from the others that action had begun for them too. All indicated that the pronghorn were extremely alert and that drawing bows for a shot would not be easy. Midmorning Rod pinged "I'm on the board, smallish buck but he'll do for my first!" Rod had proven that it could indeed be done! Midday my phone buzzed that Ryan had shot a dandy and I sighed in relief. Of everyone in the group it was Ryan I most wanted to be successful. To hear he had gotten a good buck was icing on the cake.

After several close encounters it was apparent that every sound or movement held potential to spook these wary animals. I typically hunt with a facemask, but prefer it pulled just below my nose for a consistent anchor point for my string. However, I felt that that even that extra skin showing posed a risk. I grudgingly pulled my black facemask above my nose, hoping it wouldn't affect my close range shots. I drew my bow a few times and everything felt good so I didn't think much of the change.

During my downtime I touched base with Cody and Jeff. At one point I lamented to Cody that half the animals drank facing the blind and most turned tail so quickly after finishing that getting a shot would be tough. Cody told me that the frontal shot was one of his favorite on antelope, but that he shoots a heavy bow, heavy arrows and durable broadheads. I mulled it over with him as I too shoot a relatively heavy arrow and tough broadheads. I've butchered enough game to be familiar with anatomy and studied enough online photos to be comfortable with a frontal shot, I had just never had the need to take one before. I made up my mind that if I was presented with only a frontal shot I would take it with confidence.

During my first day the activity seemed a little slow, yet by evening a dozen or more antelope had come to drink, including a couple of decent bucks that had tempted me, along with a prairie dog and a badger. None of the bucks caused me to pick up my bow and I wasn't in a particular hurry to end the hunt. Ryan/Scoot and Rod had dozens of antelope water at their two blinds, which seemed to be where most of the action was.



Prairie dogs occasionally came to drink



Mister Badger



Mister badger had a muddy chin from slurping!



Medium buck with a doe and fawn



Medium buck that tempted me

I picked up Jon on the way back to camp and he reported not a single antelope had visited his blind. He had caught up on some reading but an early morning sage grouse was his only real entertainment. I wanted to get him in a better location for the second day.

We arrived at camp to find that Scoot had gotten a good buck late in the day without telling us, so already 3 of our party had tagged out! I offered Jon his pick of the blinds after his first day fizzle. In pretty short order he picked Ryan's and told me I could have Rod's. I surprised all of them by letting them know I had a good feeling about mine and wanted to stick there for another day. I had already made up my mind that Jon deserved one of the two blinds that had seen success, and thought Scoot would go to the other because they

would be in the same truck, so I had left some of my gear in my blind thinking it was a given that I'd be returning there. But I reiterated that Jon was welcome to take it if he wanted, which he declined.

The second morning started out quickly with an extremely nervous doe drinking just after 7am followed shortly by one of the medium bucks I had passed the first day. Jon had a doe with 2 fawns drink about 8:30am and others sporadically arrived thereafter. Midmorning I realized I had failed to grab two thermos bottles of ice water from my cooler in the truck, so with only half a bottle of energy/hydration mix it was going to be a long thirsty day. I mulled it over and decided I dare not leave the blind because any antelope within a mile could potentially see me and mess up the day's hunt.



Cute yearling doe

Jon pinged that he had a buck down at 11am, leaving me as the last holdout. A couple of small bucks with a group of does and fawns watered not long after and with noticeably more activity than the first day I was confident. About 1pm I peeked out the rear of the blind. The heat waves were horrible, but my Vortex binoculars confirmed what appeared to be a really good buck with a doe feeding on a far hillside. Given their proximity I felt they would come drink at some point. I kept tabs on them and soon they were heading my way! I nervously awaited their arrival and tried to double-check that I was ready.



Good buck approaching with a doe

After what seemed like forever the doe stepped into view near the water. She was extremely cautious and stared at the blind for several minutes. The buck came in and I caught my breath – he was big enough to make my blood pressure rise and there was no way I'd pass him up given the chance! He barged right in and began to slurp water broadside, but the doe hadn't relaxed her vigil and I dared not try to draw my bow.

Finally the doe hesitantly began to approach the water, but the buck shifted position until he too faced me. Having prepared myself for a frontal shot I wanted to draw but the doe remained at high alert. The buck finished his drink, raised his head and began to turn away. Based on my prior observations I realized my shot opportunity was rapidly ending. I felt it was now or never, so drew my bow. The doe hopped backward and the buck began walking to my right. I was at full draw, but he was already approaching the edge of the blind's shooting window. Too many things were happening at once. Between my anchor point feeling "off" due to my facemask, me having to lean sideways so arrow would clear the blind and the buck moving, everything felt wrong. To add to the mix, the inside of the blind was dark while the outside was blindingly bright. My sight pins all appeared black as did my eye alignment tool (IQ Retina Lock). I put my 20-yard pin on the buck and triggered my release but my arrow kicked up dust beyond him and I immediately realized I had shot over his back.

The pair wasn't overly spooked but within seconds they were out of range and I was left piecing together what had gone awry. I determined that as I had feared, I wasn't locked onto my anchor like I should have been. Although my pins were black, my eye alignment would have been clear had I been anchored correctly.

I watched the pair feed approximately half a mile distant and took solace that they hadn't been alerted to my presence and given the fact they remained within sight it was likely that they would return to the water again at some point. At least I hoped so.



Bugger how had I missed this guy?



Most definitely a “shooter” in my book!

I texted Scoot's crew the woeful news. They were sympathetic. So much so that Scoot's only response was "How did you like your hat before it was full of holes?" Referring to our agreement that anyone who missed would suffer further humiliation of the rest of the crew taking a shot at their hat at the same distance back in camp.

Scoot also apologized that they had decided to hit the road for their long drive home and wouldn't be around that evening. I wouldn't have holes in my hat after all, although I'd have to figure out a way to make it up to them. I wouldn't be able to share camp with them for another evening after all. *Tomorrow could be one day to late...*

The remainder of the day brought several medium-sized bucks plus does and fawns, but after seeing the bigger one I wasn't ready to drop the string. I practiced drawing and locking into shooting position with my facemask up dozens of times to ensure I could capitalize on my next opportunity.

Perhaps a mile away I could still see the big buck hanging out with the doe. Late afternoon a smaller buck joined them and they fed and milled around for the remainder of the evening. Just before sunset the big buck moved off by himself and disappeared into some sage, where I assumed he would bed for the night. Knowing he remained close to my waterhole gave me a good feeling about the next day and helped ease the sting of my catch-and-release opportunity.

Just before sunset Mister Badger came by again, shuffling and sniffing around before slaking his thirst at the waterhole. Not long before dark a flock of sage grouse approached. Their necks looked like periscopes above the grass as they walked in to drink. They were neat to watch up close. Their season didn't open until Sept 1 or I would have tried a wild chicken for dinner!



Mister Badger returned the evening of my second day



Mister Badger posing for the camera



Sage grouse – very camouflaged!

With the others gone, I had no incentive to head back to camp so chose to sit until dark despite being parched. No pronghorn came in but it was still cool to see the badger and spruce grouse plus the sunset was awesome.



Sunset on day two was phenomenal

I finished the day by returning to my truck and immediately chugging a couple of bottles of cold water to rehydrate. Cold water seemingly never tasted so good!

The next morning began as a repeat of day two...except I grabbed my ice water! Just after sunrise the grouse showed up again so I snapped more pictures and video of them. Suddenly a buck appeared! He was one I had passed before, but nothing to sneeze at. He didn't hesitate, but came right in and drank broadside with his head hidden behind the dirt berm surrounding the water. Aye caramba, could it get any better than this?!



Talk about a golden opportunity!



Better view of the buck's horns – would I regret passing him?

My text to the Minnesota crew later summarized the encounter:

“Lordy I just passed a good buck. One I’ve seen before and I was sorely tempted. He drank broadside with his head hidden by a berm for a long time. I may regret passing this golden opportunity.”

They chided me for being picky but wished me luck. I responded with a text message that summed up my feelings:

“It’s not that I’m a trophy hunter per se, but conditions are so good and there is regular action so why get too antsy? I applied for many years. Next time it may take even more points to draw at tag. Why end it too soon? Just having fun!”

I hoped my casual attitude wouldn't come back to haunt me, but the trip had already been a stellar success and by holding out I'd been treated to plenty of entertainment that I would have otherwise missed: several visits by the badger, I'd seen my first sage grouse up close, and I'd had many additional close encounters with pronghorn and been blessed to observe their actions and interaction with a front row seat. I had no regrets and with the weather forecast to be dry for several more days it seemed a pretty safe bet to hold off and just keep enjoying the experience.

Perhaps half an hour later another good buck arrived to drink. He didn't offer quite as good of a shot opportunity as the first, but it was plenty doable. Again I passed. Both of these bucks had watered twice the day prior and I hoped their early visits held promise that the bigger buck would also be thirsty if he remained in the vicinity.

Suddenly the buck raised his head and stared behind my blind. He sounded an alarm buzz, similar to a deer snort, quickly turned and began trotting away. I wondered what had spooked him and it wasn't long before I found out.



What spooked this buck?

The big buck from my second day encounter came sprinting into view to chase the buck that had just left the water. They tore across the prairie in high gear, kicking up dust clouds! I moved to the window and watched them speed away for over half a mile. Then, for apparently no reason, they slowed to a walk and began to feed. It seemed to me that the bucks were testing each other and displaying their dominance with speed and aggression. It was obvious that the bigger buck was boss. Coupled with his impressive horns, his attitude made me decide to keep passing subordinate bucks and hold out for him. Soon it appeared like my wait wouldn't be very long – the other buck fed away from me, but the bigger one faced my direction as he nibbled and every step he took brought him closer to the waterhole that I guarded.

Soon I was certain that he intended to come drink. I texted Scoot's crew:

"The big guy sprinted past and chased a decent buck away from the water. He's half a mile out, but headed my way. Getting interesting. I like my odds that he'll come over for a drink at some point."

They cheered me on and echoed that they liked my odds too. I watched until he was within a couple hundred yards, and then eased to my seat to prepare for the buck's arrival.



Big buck heading for my waterhole – how exciting!

I toyed with the idea of firing up my video camera and letting it run, but I didn't want to do anything that might spook him, so opted to live without close-range video or photos. Since I knew it was just a matter of time before he showed up, I gripped my bow and clipped my release onto the string, doing everything I could think of in advance to minimize my movement once he arrived at the water.

It took longer than I expected, but eventually the buck strode into view. Initially it appeared he would take the same route as the first buck of the day and I held my breath in hopes that he would drink with his head hidden from view. Alas just as he reached the water he deviated course and circle the muddy edge. He stopped broadside directly across from me and stared in the direction he had originally come running from. I was tempted to try drawing to shoot, but forced myself to stay frozen until he relaxed and began to drink. After a minute the buck turned and approached the water head on. He didn't act skittish and quickly settled in to slurp with gusto. I had visualized a frontal shot and practiced drawing my bow dozens of times since my agonizing miss the prior afternoon. It was time to quickly and silently draw my bow. The buck apparently noticed something and raised his head to stare toward me, but my pin was already at the base of his throat and my anchor point locked. I mentally pictured the location of his vitals and gently squeezed the trigger of my release.

The arrow was away before I could see what happened and the buck whirled 180-degrees. Immediately I saw my broadhead protruding from low between his hind legs and knew the shot was not only fatal but completely devastating. My arrow had passed the length of his body, blowing through nearly every vital organ and guaranteeing a quick kill. He stumbled perhaps 30-yards and keeled over within seconds. I was awed by how quickly the hunt had come together. I had just taken my first pronghorn and he was a dandy buck to boot!

I excitedly relayed the news to Scoot and his crew and they cheered my success. I tried to convince them that since I had killed the very same buck, my miss the day before was really more like an initial and follow-up shot, but they would have none of that and chided me with laughter over the telephone. I'm not yet sure how I'm going to make good on our friendly hat shot challenge, but I'll figure something out. I snapped trophy photos and raced to get the buck broken down before the day became too hot.



Ninja view



I am humbled and blessed

I initially planned to load an antelope into the truck bed and butcher it away from the blind but the buck was much too heavy and awkward for me to lift by myself. After retrieving my butchering supplies I dove into the task of getting the meat into a large cooler of ice to ensure our family would enjoy fantastic table fare in the upcoming year.

My thoughts drifted as I quartered and deboned the buck. One minute he had been full of life, king of his world, and only concerned with his daily needs of eating and drinking. The next second I had snuffed his life without warning. Just like my friend that had passed

away it had been entirely unexpected. Perhaps you're at the top of your game right now just like this buck, but I urge you to invest some time to think about eternity today. Try reading the book of Luke in the NIV, NLT or New King James version of the Bible in the New Testament for starters. *Tomorrow could be one day too late...*

God Bless,
Carl

Postscript:

Another member of our party, Todd, was diagnosed with cancer after drawing the tag with us. He underwent chemo treatments and initially didn't think he'd be able to hunt. Thankfully treatment went very well and despite being weak, he was able to go hunt a few weeks after we did. His wife joined him to help him out, plus Jeff lent a welcome hand. Todd took a fine buck of his own and was justifiably thrilled. Crazy to realize that one of our small group almost didn't get a chance to hunt after drawing the tag. *Tomorrow could be one day too late...*

Those who know me know I'm not a hunter that focuses on horn or antler size. I've been blessed with some fine trophy animals, including this buck, but many times it's because things came my way and I would have been plenty happy taking a smaller specimen (although as Robin says, bigger animals have more meat!) As I've said many times before, I classify animals into one of two categories pretty quickly: "shooter" or "not". These categories are somewhat fluid and can be skewed by how empty our freezer may be (thankfully that's not much of a concern with Robin doing more than her share in that department), how hard I've worked, or how little time remains in a hunt. My mind reverberated "SHOOTER!" the first time I saw my buck. For those that are curious I took some rough measurements of his headgear for reference purposes. To qualify for the Pope and Young archery record keeping book a pronghorn must total at least 67-inches (the total of several dimensions including horn length and diameters at several locations). My buck measures around 71-72 inches and I couldn't be happier – praise God for Wyoming!



View from the top