

August 16, 2009

Pronghorns get free rein on the prairie

By Dawn Walton

From Monday's Globe and Mail

Albertans mend fences so they no longer hinder animals' migration

Designed to outrun saber-toothed cats as well as other ancient predators, and now, the coyotes and wolves that prowl the prairie, the pronghorn can reach a top speed of nearly 100 kilometres an hour.

That makes the antelope-like creature the fastest land mammal in North America and second only to the cheetah in the world.

But evolution didn't adapt the pronghorn to the modern face of the prairie. The traditional range of these fleet-footed nomads has steadily been chopped up by fences, railways and roads, as well as industrial plots for oil, gas and coal.

"Pronghorn don't jump fences," said Michael Sutor, a researcher at the University of Calgary, "That's the short and skinny of it. They evolved out on open prairie ... But since fences have been popping up everywhere, it causes them considerable grief."

Pronghorns have been found tangled in fences and maimed by them. Mass deaths at fence lines have also been reported as pronghorn failed to find a way around or underneath the barriers.

Now, an unlikely coalition of conservationists, hunters, landowners, government, business and the military in Alberta is working to change that. Together they are spending about \$300,000 mending fences. So far, almost 200 km of pronghorn-friendly fences have been installed in a key migration corridor for a species once nearly wiped off the planet.

"They're an icon for the Prairies," said Paul Jones, a biologist with Alberta Conservation Association, which has helped fund the project with levies collected from anglers and hunters. "We no longer have bison free roaming across the Prairies. These are sort of the last large mammal roaming on the Prairies."

In the early 1800s, an estimated 35 million bison were grazing the continent – the same as the population of pronghorn ranging from Alberta and Saskatchewan through the western United States and into northern Mexico.

Both suffered from rampant hunting and habitat destruction and by 1924, just 20,000 pronghorn remained. Protection efforts have helped the species bounce back.

The World Conservation Union's Red List of threatened species now counts 500,000 to a million pronghorn. Unlike threatened bison, the group didn't express concern about pronghorn survival, but noted that they are hurt by severe droughts and tough winters.

During the cruel winter of 1995-96, the pronghorn population in Alberta was cut in half to about 9,600, according to experts.

Mr. Sutor, who placed GPS collars on pronghorn to study migration patterns, found the animals would travel 150 to 250 km in just weeks, but also that barriers would trip them up.

Low-hanging barbed wire was tearing hair from their backs, often leaving bald spots exposed to frostbite. Dead animals were found caught in fences. During bad weather, fences can hinder the search for food and water.

"We've had instances of hundreds if not thousands of pronghorn dying during those occasions," Mr. Sutor said.

Trains and roads lined by fences present more obstacles. "We've had a couple hundred taken out in one swipe of a train," Mr. Sutor said.

He also found bottlenecks. Paths were beaten into the ground where pronghorn funnelled in to the easiest sections of fence. Some animals would spend days moving along the Trans-Canada Highway before

finding a place to cross. He noticed one doe spent 10 days trying to cross the country's main east-west artery.

Concerns have been raised in Canada and the United States about the impact of energy production on pronghorn habitat. Some research has shown that drilling forces the animals to wander beyond their home ranges.

The U.S.-based National Wildlife Federation is trying to prevent coal-bed methane development and a massive wind farm from going up in an area of Wyoming known as the pronghorn heartland.

Pronghorn populations have declined by 20 to 30 per cent in some areas as a surge in natural gas drilling has taken root in Wyoming, Colorado and Montana, according to Denver-based biologist Steve Torbit, the federation's regional executive director.

"It's a real battleground," he said.

His group has gone to court and successfully forced the removal of a towering woven-wire fence from a rancher's property in Wyoming. But that came only after pronghorn were blocked from their winter habitat on public land and thousands died in the frigid winter of 1983-84.

This spring and summer in southeastern Alberta, the tedious work of yanking the bottom line of barbed wire off fence post after fence post went on. In some places, the rusted snares were barely visible through the prairie grass as volunteers replaced it with double-stranded smooth wire that now hangs at a comparatively lofty 46 centimetres above the ground.

It is an initiative influenced by Mr. Sutor's research and spearheaded by the Alberta Fish & Game Association, which began with 37 km of fence along the northern boundary of Canadian Forces Base Suffield, north of Medicine Hat.

The group shrugs off criticism about its motivation.

"People are always under the assumption that it's just guys who like to shoot stuff and catch stuff and that's not always the case," said Kevin Wilson, the project's manager.

"Really this is about biodiversity and about maintaining a heritage resource. This is not about creating more hunting opportunities," he said.

Calgary-based EnCana Corp., North America's largest gas producer, donated \$17,500 to the project after hearing Mr. Wilson's pronghorn presentation.

"I was absolutely gobsmacked that it was that simple," said spokesman Bruce DeBaie. "I was also surprised they can't jump fences."

Officials at CFB Suffield, which is also home to a federally-protected 458-square-kilometre National Wildlife Area, were so impressed with the pilot project they decided to carry it on themselves backed by a \$230,000 budget.

So far, 153 km of new fence were installed at the base. The military also lowered the height to just more than a metre so that deer and elk could more easily pass over top.

"This base operates as a very important piece of habitat on a North American scale for pronghorn. They've identified it as being a congregation zone," said Delaney Boyd, range biologist for the base, adding that 5,000 animals graze there in winter.

The project is small, but there are hopes to expand it. Still, those involved already call it a success. Donated motion cameras have taken photos of pronghorn safely ducking under the smooth wire. Deer too have been captured scooting beneath.

"It's a neat little project with a small change that doesn't affect any landowners, but it has a big effect on the wildlife," said Neal Wilson, manager of Antelope Creek Ranch, west of Brooks, where about six kilometres of fence line were recently retrofitted.

At the ranch, which operates as a partnership among hunter conservation groups and the Alberta government, Mr. Wilson plans to fix more fence. Already, he added, the idea is gaining speed.

“Some neighbours to the south are doing their fences as well,” he said.