

SONORAN PRONGHORN MONTHLY UPDATE

January 24, 2008

First, I apologize; the last monthly update was in September 2007. With my month vacation in West Africa in October, and all the work when I got back, unfortunately I have been too busy to get one out until now. This will cover everything since then.

Captive Breeding:

North Half: All the pronghorn in this section are doing well. There are 9 male yearlings born last year in this section, which we are planning to capture, ear tag and move into the Southeast Quarter within the next few weeks. This will decrease the harassment to pregnant females and young fawns to be born this year.

Southwest Quarter: All the pronghorn in this pen are doing well also. There are 3 male yearlings in this pen that we will also capture and move to the Southeast quarter. We are also planning to capture an adult male from the US population to put in this pen for breeding, to replace the adult buck that died in August. We had initially thought we would just allow the 2-year-old buck in this pen to breed this year, but this meant we would have to move his mother and female siblings out of this section before breeding. Not wanting to risk any harm to the females, we decided it would be better to move him out and bring another male into the pen.

Southeast Quarter: The 5 juvenile bucks in this section are doing well. On January 11-12, we captured 4 of these bucks and placed GPS radio collars on them in anticipation of their release into the wild. Unfortunately, they became wise to our darting techniques, and we could not capture the fifth animal. We are in the process of putting a gate into this section of the pen, which we will simply open and let all 5 leave the pen. After they have left, we will put the excess males from the north and southwest section into this section to hold for a year until their release.

We suspect there is a bobcat coming and going through the pen. We have seen sign mostly in the southeast quarter. We have 4 traps in the pen, and are trying to catch and remove it. This is one of our top priorities now, as there will be newborn fawns in the pen in a month or so, and we need to be sure there are no predators accessing the pen.

We still have 2 of our 4 positions vacant, and are trying to fill them as quickly as possible. In the meantime, Loeta and Sean are working especially hard at the pen to get all the work done.

Water Projects: Nothing new to report at this time.

Forage Enhancements: Nothing new to report at this time.

Other Projects: We are continuing to make progress on the initial work to start a second captive breeding project. We had a meeting at YPG with USFWS (Kofa, Cabeza Prieta and Ecological Services), Yuma Proving Grounds, Marine, Air Force and BLM personnel to discuss the project. The USFWS is in the process of setting up an Interdisciplinary Team to continue to move this project forward.

Cabeza Prieta has hired a new Wildlife Biologist/Recovery Team Leader. Jim Atkinson started on January 14th.

We conducted a range wide survey in Sonora Mexico December 6-14. We observed 360 pronghorn comprising 33 groups on the survey. The largest group was 37 animals, and was seen on the east side of the highway; several single pronghorn were also seen. The majority of the pronghorn were seen in the area east of Highway 8, where we observed 325 pronghorn in 27 groups. West of Highway 8 (including El Pinacate), we observed 35 pronghorn in 6 groups.

Applying the sighting probability model and associated correction factors, our estimate of the total population was 404. In the area east of Highway 8, the population estimate was 354. West of the highway, the population was estimated at 50 pronghorn. This estimate was lower than the previous two surveys (634 in 2006, and 684 in 2004). We observed many areas that were extremely dry; in some places, vegetation appeared dead. We suspect there has been a serious drought in pronghorn range in Sonora, leading to the lower numbers this year. However, while we were doing the survey, there were several significant rain showers, which should green the area up and help the remaining pronghorn.

We also captured 4 pronghorn (3 female, 1 male) and placed GPS radio collars on them in the Pinacate Biosphere Reserve. Unfortunately, on a follow up telemetry flight, the male's collar was on mortality signal. When we recovered the collar, there was nothing left of the buck except some tufts of hair. However, due to the short time lapse between collaring and the death, we suspect it was capture related. This buck's temperature rose dangerously high during the collaring, and likely led to internal problems.

We have begun using a new technique for capturing Sonoran pronghorn, in an attempt to reduce mortalities from the net-gun method. A new drug, which is reversible, A3080, has been used on African antelope with good results. Prior to using it on Sonoran pronghorn, it was tested on American pronghorn in Chino valley, in which 15 female pronghorn were darted with the drug from a helicopter. These animals were then radio collared, the drug reversed, pronghorn recovered, and released. There were no mortalities on this capture (typically 10-15% of American pronghorn captured with the net gun die). Based on this success, we have used this technique in Mexico and at the captive breeding pen. Of the 15 Sonoran pronghorn we've captured with this drug, the buck in Mexico has been the only mortality.

Wild Pronghorn: We have conducted several telemetry flights. Pronghorn have typically been using the burned area on South Tac (up to 20 pronghorn in one group), the San Cristobal Valley, and Mohawk Valley. On the last flight, we saw a group of 12 pronghorn on North Tac, the first time in over a year that they have been up there (also in a burned area).