

# Fixin' for Pronghorn

WYOMING PRONGHORN PROVIDE AN EXCITING CHALLENGE FOR RIFLE, SCOPE AND CARTRIDGE.

By RICHARD VENOLA





## CZ 550 AMERICAN



**T**he most distinctive feature of hunting pronghorn is the uncertainty of range. You might pop into a coulee and hemingway one off-hand at 30 yards or boddington one off your rucksack at 300.

Obviously, something flat-shooting with variable glass and good rangefinding ability is desired.

There are a number of ways to solve this equation, and you can go traditional or state-of-the-art. Sometimes the two are one and the same.

I like traditional calibers, so when Black Hills Shooters Supply ([www.bhshooters.com](http://www.bhshooters.com), 800/289-2506) asked what chambering I'd prefer to use, I was excited to hear that the class 6.5x55 Swede was on the menu. This Rapid City outfit, not the same as Black Hills Ammunition, is the exclusive distributor for Norma ammunition and powder in the U.S. The people at Norma wanted to showcase a host of new premium rounds with a wide assortment of foreign and domestic projectiles, so their selection of high-end hunting rounds included a number of exotics. Older military chamberings enjoy first-rate boxer cases and top-drawer bullets, and the African PH line offers the chunky stuff one normally sees on duty in Africa and Alaska.

BHSS rep Richard Folsland tells me that "Norma is making a full-court press for hunters who are looking for something a cut above." Norma has been building premium ammo for Weatherby and Nosler for years. It's

spendy, but after you've driven the camper halfway across the country, what's a box of ammunition? Get on paper with cheap stuff, then fine-tune with premium ammo.

What makes the 6.5 Swede remarkable is that it is unremarkable. It sits there in the middle of the ballistic spectrum: fast, but not too fast. The bullet is heavy enough to punch through a shoulder, but light enough to open on anything. It's been referred to as "the best military cartridge that never went to war," though this is not so: Tens of thousands of Swedish volunteers, *Svenska Frivilligkåren*, fought the Soviets alongside their Finnish neighbors. Many were reservists, and the Swedish government turned a blind eye to the use of their issued rifles. Many more of the excellent M1896 rifles were supplied to the Finns, who used these well-built small-ring Mausers to augment their heavier M39s. Suffice it to say that the round has plenty of street cred.

Fortunately for American hunters, CZ offers the tough 550 in 6.5 Swede. Built on traditional lines and packing the same massive claw

**There are many recipes for success with pronghorn, but this mix of old and new worked perfectly.**

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extractor that fans of the pre-'64 Winchester Model 70 so wistfully covet, the 550 is a working man's working rifle. The handsome Mauser-based specimen that showed up in Wyoming exhibited excellent fit and finish without being so pretty that you didn't want to risk bashing it around. The rifle and round were well matched by the scope I brought along, a Nikon Buckmaster 4.5-14x40mm. I'd never used a Nikon scope before, and after getting it snugly into the CZ rings, I was highly impressed with the side-focus feature. This greatly sped up the zeroing process and proved to be a good friend while I stalked the wily pronghorn. Nikon's Buckmaster is considered the middle of the pack, with the Monarch holding top spot ([www.nikonssportoptics.com](http://www.nikonssportoptics.com)). Of course, pronghorns don't hide in dense thickets at zero-dark-thirty in the morning, so paying for exotic coatings doesn't buy you additional hunting time. For deer or elk, the Monarch's extra light suction would be worth the additional layout, but for the plains, the Buckmaster's an outstanding choice (it's now on my vz 24 at home).

Our hosts for the hunt were the gracious and down-to-earth Ralph and Lenora Dampman at Trophy Ridge Outfitters ([www.trophyridgeoutfitters.com](http://www.trophyridgeoutfitters.com)). About 20 repeat hunters were in the friendly camp—mostly seasoned Pennsylvanians. They were well armed, but my rifle/optic/ammo combination was equal to all of theirs in terms of practical performance. Plus, the coolness factor of the 6.5 Swede was exceeded only by the quality of Lenora's desserts. I attached the scope upon arrival and zeroed off the front lawn. The rifle yielded the almost expected one MOA. Alas, I overtorqued the ring screws and had to bring home



**Zeroing was a snap using the side-focus Buckmaster 4.5-14x40mm, with rounds hitting at the expected MOA. For safari-minded readers, Norma has introduced the upscale African PH line of über-rounds. The author only got a hat...**



**These 120-grain Nosler ballistic tips did very well on the range and in the field.**

the scope with its rings attached.

Our guide was Daryl Neugebauer, a local from nearby Pine Haven. He possesses a thorough knowledge of local flora and fauna and was able to put up with fellow hunter Bob Robb's

wisecracking as well as Folsland's bad jokes. He was tireless during the stalks and knows how to handle a four-wheel drive.

On opening morning we stalked within spitting distance of a small group led by a good representative buck, but they bolted. This must have worked up a thirst in the leader, because he broke away and dog-legged back to a distant cattle tank. We gently eased down the track, and this time he didn't seem alarmed; he grazed with no apparent concern. I popped up a pocket-size Leupold monocular rangefinder and had him at 225 yards ([www.leupold.com](http://www.leupold.com)). The grass was up to mid-torso, so I took a rested shot. One of the nice things about a Duplex crosshair reticle is that you can hold over for longer shots, but the slippery performance of the .264 projectile often makes that concern academic.

The 120-grain Nosler left the tube at a hair over 2,800 fps and was still going about 2,300 fps when it hit perfectly above the shoulder, still packing 1,500 ft-lbs of energy. Upon

inspecting the wound channel, I saw that the bullet opened up early, plowed through the heaviest portion of the spine and exited, leaving a smooth wound just smaller than a quarter. Nosler's data says the ballistic tip needs between 1,600 and 3,000 fps for optimum performance, and with a BC of .458, the 6.5 Swede will sustain this performance window all the way out to 700 yards—certainly beyond the limits of an ethical shot ([www.norma.cc](http://www.norma.cc)).

At the end of the hunt we had the unexpected pleasure of an encounter with a hard-charger who must be Wyoming's most professional public servant. Newcastle game warden Dustin Shorma cheerfully greeted us as we hit pavement and helped us tag and inspect the critters. He was genuinely concerned with the quality of our hunt and the health of the game. We immediately judged that he was a man of quality, as he packed a custom 1911 in a gorgeous Tauris rig ([www.taurisholsters.com](http://www.taurisholsters.com)). Talk about a perfect first impression! This award-winning officer is a



The Nikon's side focus really helped on the various ranges encountered.

graduate of the University of Wyoming's wildlife management program and is an excellent ambassador for his state and his alma mater.

Twenty million years ago, 12 species of *Antilocapridae* roamed North America. Only *A. americana* remains, thriving on the west-central prairie. Perhaps this surviving species benefited from its speed, not being weighed down by the elaborate headgear of its late ancestors. The

demise of its ancient relatives is no doubt a relief to the scorers for Boone & Crockett, as some sported four or even six horns. To settle campfire debates, the pronghorn is neither an antelope nor a goat, but is its own kind of cloven-hoofed ungulate of the sub-family *Pecora*, family *Bovidae*. Adults weigh from 90 to 140 pounds and are light-boned.

Many folks hunt them with .243s, but seasoned outfitters

report mixed results. Whether this is due to the .243 frequently being a "beginner's rifle," resulting in iffy shot placement, or the lighter-skinned bullets failing on bone is uncertain, but there is a growing preference for the time-tested mid-caliber chamberings. The Swede is the elder statesman of this loose family, which includes (among others) .257 Roberts, .260 Remington, 6.5 Mannlicher-Schoenauer, 7-30 Waters and—at the high end—the 7mm-08 Remington.

One of the aspects of these middle-ground loadings is lack of perceived recoil. Adding to the weight of the bullet is the volume of the powder pushing itself down the barrel; it all adds to the punch in the shoulder. The combination of light bullets with modest powder columns means no nasty scope cuts on the eyebrow. More important, it means no fear of the scope becoming Ginsu cutlery on your forehead. With no flinching, you get superior shot placement.

Pronghorns are specialized animals that demand flexible gear. There are many recipes for success, and this one turned out to be exceptionally effective. (4)



Wyoming game warden Dustin Shorma was the consummate professional. This avid hunter helped the hunting party with tags and performed the necessary inspections and samplings of the critters. Note the cool Tauris rig and custom 1911.