

DESERT DENIZENS

STORY BY ANNA JOHNSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE ANDREJKO

After more than 17 years of partnered wildlife conservation work in Arizona, the statewide population of the Sonoran pronghorn is at an estimated 458 individuals.

It's been a road of challenges mixed with great strides of achievement in learning how to best conserve and protect one of the state's most striking species — the Sonoran pronghorn. A resilient animal — and the fastest land mammal in North America — this species has lived through significant Arizona drought, increasing in numbers through a specialized program.

The Sonoran Pronghorn Captive Breeding Program was launched after Arizona's population of the species was significantly lost in 2002 — from approximately 100 individuals down to only 21 — following a severe national drought when the state went without rain for 13 months. Just before it was too late for those 21 animals, the rains came.

Prior to 2002, periodic droughts had already made profound impacts on Sonoran pronghorn. At that time, the

mortality rate was 20 percent per year, placing the species at higher risk when the severe drought of 2002 occurred.

Today, after more than 17 years of partnered wildlife conservation work in Arizona, the statewide population of the species is at an estimated 458 individuals. Although Sonoran pronghorn continue to be listed as endangered, they have great potential to be “down-listed.” Due to this status, pronghorn conservation remains a priority for the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD).

“During the drought of 2002, an event also experienced in other states, a federal process didn't exist to support wildlife in crisis,” says John Hervert, Terrestrial Wildlife Program manager. “Watching pronghorn suffer from dehydration was painful for wildlife professionals to see and motivated change across the country. It became clear to all of us what happens when



SONORAN PRONGHORN

you do nothing.”

Soon after, Arizona wildlife conservation partners met to work on Sonoran pronghorn recovery goals — plans that are still used today to help the species rebound.

Help from Partners

From 2004 to 2006 with an informal agreement, Mexico supplemented captive pen pronghorn to Arizona Game and Fish when statewide populations were low. “Some source stock came from the Quitovac Mexican population of pronghorn, including five does and one buck,” says Stephanie Doerries, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wildlife biologist. Source stock was also provided by U.S. partners.

In turn, the department assists Mexican biologists survey their pronghorn herds and plans are in order to repatriate six Arizona Sonoran pronghorn back to Mexico.

Sonoran pronghorn were federally listed as endangered in 1967. U.S. Fish and Wildlife is responsible for managing terrestrial and freshwater organisms protected by the Endangered Species Act. The federal agency acts in partnership with AZGFD to help ensure conservation actions for the species have positive outcomes.



Pronghorn Ranching

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Plan for Sonoran pronghorn, threats to the species include habitat loss and fragmentation, reduced forage quality, altered habitat structure, extended drought and climate change, as well as reduced access to and availability of water.

Committed to conserving and protecting native species, Arizona Game and Fish maintains and manages two captive breeding populations across the state: one at the Cabeza Prieta National



Wildlife Refuge (345 total captive/non-captive pronghorn) near Ajo and the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge (185 total captive/non-captive pronghorn) near Yuma. “We have established a second and a third population outside of the original Cabeza population — referred to as the ‘Kofa’ and ‘Sauceda’ populations,” Hervert says.

Where there are captive herds, department staff manage individuals to encourage health, study behavior and fulfill daily needs to increase numbers and survivability with the goal of releasing the animals into the wild.

Dispersed release locations serve a vital purpose in protecting the species from disease or drought decimation. New areas of suitable habitat are being tested with the goal of finding additional release sites for Sonoran pronghorn.

The Cabeza Prieta herd is managed by Ajo Sonoran Pronghorn Supervisor Noah Ratliff. Nicknamed the “pronghorn rancher” by his friends and family, Ratliff values the impact he’s making in the captive breeding program. “Working at the pen involves a combination of animal husbandry and general maintenance knowledge,” he says.

Working with wildlife technicians Tania Peret and Ryan Dow, Ratliff supplements the north (29 pronghorn) and south (34 pronghorn) herds’ diets every other day with hay and alfalfa and maintains native vegetation for the animals’ consumption. When rain is more frequent, pronghorn tend to eat less at their food station because pen vegetation is more lush and satisfying to their taste. Naturally in the



summer when vegetation is difficult to come by, pen residents frequent their supplement station more often.

Each visit Dow, Peret and Ratliff observe the captive herds from two nearby hills with spotting scopes — making notes about the individuals that appear in the pen, describing how they look and recording ear tag numbers. This is how they track animals



that are not appearing over time, realizing there could be a problem. The Kofa captive breeding pen is similarly managed by wildlife technicians Russell Gardner and Lenna Lough.

“The captive breeding pen is about 18 years old, and it hasn’t had an easy life,” Ratliff says. “Our work includes maintaining sections of fence, fixing irrigation pipes and chasing electrical ‘gremlins.’ Lastly, we maintain multiple drinkers and provide feed throughout the desert to support Sonoran pronghorn.”

Electric fencing keeps predators away to give pronghorn the best chance at survival, especially when fawns are present.

“We get to watch them grow from the fawn stage to yearlings to adults. Then they’re released and hopefully survive in the wild to form herds of wild pronghorn,” Ratliff says. “The job can be tough and at times repetitive, but usually the pronghorn do things that make me smile in the end.”

The first release of four captive pronghorn occurred in 2007 and since then a total of 362 have been set free. To prevent heat exhaustion and ensure the safety of pregnant does, pronghorn are translocated and released annually in December or January. They are transported in specially adapted air-conditioned trailers to areas with suitable habitat.

Gaining Ground

Due to the progress made with captive herds in Arizona and with growing partnerships in other states, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife is in the initial stages of planning to host a third pronghorn population in the Chuckwalla region. Having successful herds survive in other regions benefits the sustainability of the species.

“Understanding how to successfully manage pronghorn in the Sonoran Desert was not easy. We have learned so much about this species since the

1960s,” says Doerries.

Since those early years, new information includes: knowing environmental factors influencing fawn recruitment and the natural history of the species and its habitat preferences.

How to safely handle and transport pronghorn was also a challenge in the beginning and is much improved today. “Over time we’ve been able to radio collar pronghorn and monitor habitat use to help determine what the species needs so we can better support them,” Doerries says.

Future Resilience

In order to downlist the Sonoran pronghorn from the federal Endangered Species List, criteria must be met to ensure the population can survive without human assistance. Predetermined standards must be met for all captive herds for five consecutive years to ensure the resilience of the species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recovery strategy for Sonoran pronghorn is “to secure a sufficient number of populations that are viable under appropriate management scenarios within select areas throughout their historical range.”

Six benchmarks must be met to move the species from “endangered” to “threatened” status. “Three populations of Sonoran pronghorn must meet or exceed a specific target abundance for at least five of seven years. Additionally, we need to ensure habitat continuity, minimize human disturbance and threats to habitat quality, retain genetic diversity and maintain legal protections for all populations,” Doerries says. “The partnerships in the binational Sonoran Pronghorn Recovery Team are essential for achieving these goals.” 🦌

■ Anna Johnson is the associate editor of *Arizona Wildlife Views*.

“

We get to watch them grow from the fawn stage to yearlings to adults. Then they’re released and hopefully survive in the wild to form herds of wild pronghorn.”



SONORAN PRONGHORN

QUICK FACTS:

Sonoran Pronghorn

Sonoran pronghorn are an endangered subspecies of the American pronghorn and are one of four surviving subspecies found in western North America.

The name “pronghorn” describes the horns of the males, which are sharply pointed and grow in a pronged form. Members of the species are identifiable by the white patch of hair on their rump, while males are recognized for the brown patches behind their cheekbones.

Pronghorn have incredible eyesight and are one of the fastest land mammals — able to run at over 60 mph. On average, females birth two fawns per season in February and March.

Sonoran pronghorn live in herds that primarily occur in southwestern Arizona and Mexico.

