

# Ancient Pronghorn Traps



Remains of the corral wall built with juniper limbs

It took me awhile to see what was here. A juniper limb lay among low sagebrush. It was about six feet long and silver-gray, so old the wood had disintegrated into long fibers.

Bryan Hockett had pointing it out to me. Bryan is an archeologist with the Bureau of Land Management. We are near Spruce Mountain, about 30 miles south of Wells, in an area of sagebrush, rabbitbrush and a few scattered, juniper trees.

As Bryan points out a second juniper limb, my eyes travel from it to the next limb and the next and then it hit me. Hidden among this sagebrush was a man-made structure. Ancestral *Newe* people (named Western Shoshone by whites) built a pronghorn antelope trap here.

Bryan described how the limb had been planted upright so a notch stood about three-feet high. Other limbs were propped in the notch

forming a fence. The planted limb has long since fallen over, but its mate remains wedged in the notch. Brush piled against the fence made it look more substantial, forming a 3-4-foot-high fence tall enough to contain miniature pronghorns that prefer running over jumping.

This corral trap was huge. We roughly estimated it encompassed 20 acres. The fence contained a 100-yard-wide opening. At one time, lines of piled sagebrush ran outward from the edges of this opening, forming V-shaped wings that went for at least a mile. The wings faced south and intercepted pronghorns moving north during their spring migrations to higher elevations.

Bryan described a scene hundreds of years ago, when *Newe* family groups gathered here. Their first task was to repair the fence and wings since these traps were only used occasionally. A pronghorn headman, especially good at these hunts, prepared the pronghorns by spending several days with an approaching herd, sleeping near them, talking to them and praying for a successful hunt.

The trapping procedure began with a herd of pronghorn about two miles south of the trap. As the animals grazed, they noticed a line of men to the south of them. The pronghorns continued grazing but walked north, away from the men. The men kept pace with the animals, slowly walking toward the trap. The pronghorns did not become alarmed until they realized the brush wings were hemming them in. The only direction that seemed safe was ahead and they began to run. As the wings became closer, the pronghorns responded by running faster. They saw safety in the open country ahead, where they would have room to run and escape.

They entered the corral opening at full speed. An ingenious aspect of the trap was how it surrounded a low rise in the ground. The running animals still thought an escape route lie ahead since the slight mound hid the far end of the corral. Only when they were inside the corral did they crest the rise and see the trap. The herd swept around the encircling corral wall and back toward the entrance, hoping to escape.

However, the opening was now filled with men, the group's best hunters who had remained hidden nearby. Arrows killed some animals as they swept past and away from the opening. (Bows and arrows were

only recent weapons used at this trap. More than 400 years ago, the weapons would have been *atlatl* darts and spears).

Completely panicked, the pronghorns relied on their only defense, speed. They ran, circling inside the corral walls. People stood outside the fence, firing arrows into the panicked animals, specifically targeting bucks and dry does. The herd quickly tired and slowed, resulting in many of the exhausted animals being clubbed to death. Does with fawns were finally allowed to escape.

The triumphant group of people celebrated a successful hunt. They cooked and ate meat such as organs and tongues, meat that would not keep. Much of the meat was dried to eat later. Hides, sinew, horn, bone and small intestine were collected for use in clothing and tools.

The group walked away from the trap, carrying food to help them through the coming winter.

May 2016

<<< [Click your back arrow to return to the list of articles](#)