

DRAWING A DREAM HUNT

Women of OHA take Oregon's High Desert by storm on an antelope archery hunt.

BY JENN KEPLER



'I love a good adventure and to learn as I go.'

In the southeast corner of Oregon, near the Nevada border, lies a sagebrush sea with rolling and rugged hills, broad valleys, spring-fed creeks, and dry lake beds. The dirt roads that run through this area are rough and become impassable in snow and wet conditions. There are no developed hiking trails, and help is a long way away.

Here, the Beatys Butte Unit covers roughly 2,360 square miles, 83 percent of which is public land. The Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, established in 1936 by Franklin D. Roosevelt to help protect the declining pronghorn population, is nestled in the northwest corner of the unit. The Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, also established by Roosevelt's 1936 executive order, sits 20 miles to the south, in Nevada. These two refuges provide important habitat for America's fastest land mammal, whose population has significantly rebounded thanks to wildlife management and conservation efforts. ODFW estimates there are roughly 25,000 pronghorn in the state.

This dramatic and remote landscape is also home to bighorn sheep, mule deer, sage-grouse, and hundreds of other diverse wildlife. But Kristie Hendon didn't see any animals as she and a friend ventured into the Beatys Butte Unit for Kristie's September 2024 controlled pronghorn hunt.

Kristie had been applying for a rifle pronghorn tag for 10 years.

"I was starting to feel like I'd never be able to hunt a pronghorn, because most rifle tags seem to require about 20 points to draw," Kristie said. So she started looking into archery tags. "Sure enough, I had enough points to draw the tag," she said. "I was so excited that I got a tag."

Kristie grew up in a family that rifle hunted for deer and elk on the Oregon coast. She didn't get into hunting until she was 16, when she would stay with her grandparents and go with her grandfather.

"I just loved being in the woods looking for animals," she said. When she was 17, she hunted in the Ochoco Mountains with her grandfather, and he taught her how to field dress a deer.

"I knew at that moment that I loved hunting," Kristie said. She hunted with her dad for a few years after that, and even after becoming pregnant with her first child. But soon she found herself homebound with her kids for about 12 years.

"I really wanted to be in the woods, but it was hard with three little ones," she said. As her kids got older, she started going hunting with their father. "He started bowhunting in 2012, and I quickly fell in love

with archery after I called in his first elk. I had no idea you could call in an animal and get that close to them. I purchased a bow and started going hunting during archery elk season."

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With the Beatys Butte Unit being a seven-hour drive from her home, most of Kristie's scouting was done via OnX. She also found an Oregon pronghorn hunters group on Facebook and made a post, fully expecting backlash, but instead was astonished when members sent her OnX pins and tips and said she could reach out to them at any time with questions.

Kristie also attended an archery skills camp for women hosted by Her Outdoor Journey at the NW Mountain Challenge. "I made sure I was shooting well for the hunt," Kristie said. "I left the camp feeling confident that I could shoot an animal successfully with my bow."

With several watering holes marked on her OnX and her shooting skills on point, Kristie invited her friend Aubree Cook to join her on the hunt.

"When Kristie asked me to come with her on this hunt, I'm not going to lie, I was a bit nervous, but mostly excited," Aubree said. "I'm very grateful for all of Kristie's research prior to this hunt."

Equipped with Aubree's Starlink, a rooftop tent, freeze-dried meals, and hunting gear, the two women embarked on the long and bumpy drive to Kristie's first OnX pin. They arrived the day before the season started, and there was already a blind set up at the first watering hole. So they went to the next pin – another watering hole – where they found another blind. They had yet to see any pronghorn, but with only



Kristie heads back to the truck with her hard-earned harvest.

one day to scout before the season opener, they continued onward to Kristie's third OnX pin. Not only did this watering hole not have any water, but there also weren't any pronghorn. "I wasn't going to set up my blind there," Kristie said.

She had one more spot to check.

"I'm more of a 'Let's just go and see what happens' kind of person," Kristie said. "I love a good adventure and to learn as I go." They parked by a berm at the final pin and could hardly believe what they saw at the watering hole: a herd of at least 100 pronghorn – and no hunting blind.

This was the place, Kristie knew. She and Aubree set up their blind near the watering hole, then curled up in their sleeping bags in the rooftop tent for a few hours of shut-eye.

They were in the blind before sunup, and that was where they stayed for the next 12 hours – without a single bathroom break. "The first day in the blind was very cold and wet," Kristie said. It rained for a good part of the day. Everything was wet, including her bow. "Hot coffee and chicken broth were lifesavers," Kristie said. Despite watching pronghorn for most of the day from the blind, Kristie didn't have an opportunity to take a shot.

That night, the rooftop tent shook wildly with the wind. She and Aubree decided not to sit in the blind the next day. Instead, they explored the desert terrain, collected obsidian, looked for arrowheads, admired rabbits, and glassed the pronghorn from the berm.

On the third day of the hunt, they returned to the blind before sunup. The pronghorn were still there. "I drew my bow about 10 times," Kristie said. She had ranged the watering hole at 45 yards from the blind, and she knew where a buck would need to be to get a good shot.

Just before noon, a pronghorn buck appeared at the watering hole, right where she wanted him. "He was tiny, though," Kristie said. She'd waited so long for one to appear in this spot, she was prepared to take the shot. But he was not alone for long. Several does walked up behind him; they could sense movement in the blind and started to spook. And then it happened: A large buck made his way through the does and went straight to the watering hole. He was in the spot for the shot.

Kristie let her arrow fly.

They watched him run about 100 hundred yards and then collapse.

"Walking toward him, all I could think about was being thankful for everything that led to this moment: my friend who was experiencing this with me, and a good shot that made sure the pronghorn didn't suffer," Kristie said. This Beatys Butte pronghorn was Kristie's first archery harvest.

It was hot out, so they got to work right away. Kristie let Aubree take the lead with skinning the hide. Aubree, a taxidermist with Pack Out Taxidermy in Scappoose, would be mounting the pronghorn for Kristie. She showed Kristie how to cut around the horns. "She took great care with his hide because pronghorn hides tend to go bad fast, and their hair will fall out," Kristie said. The two women worked together to field dress the pronghorn and get the meat on ice quickly.

They stayed one more night in the desert and then made their way back home the next day. At home, Kristie cooked the meat and savored the reward for all her patience and determination.

"It was the best game meat I've ever had, and I love blacktail – it's my favorite," she said. "I can't explain what it tastes like, other than just really good meat."

If you've never hunted pronghorn, Kristie's advice is to go for it.

"If you are lucky enough to draw a tag, the pronghorn hunting community is very helpful," she said. "Reach out to people who know the area, or reach out to the Oregon Hunters Association, because they have a lot of resources, as well. Ask questions and just go do it."



Kristie and Aubree celebrate their unforgettable archery antelope hunt in Beatys Butte.