



THE PLIGHT OF THE PRONGHORN

By Helen Campbell

A beautiful Sunday hike turns dark and gruesome . . . your stomach turns and you try not to look . . . it's a radio-collared male pronghorn, his legs repulsively twisted in the barbed wire. You can't tell how long ago he died or how long he suffered but you know he did.

The Friends of the Forest's Wranglers-mounted volunteers-are doing what they can to prevent this tragedy from happening again. Implausible as it may seem, pronghorn do not jump fences, but rather crawl underneath the bottom wire. When that bottom wire is barbed and low to the ground, it can become a death trap and create barriers to movement of the herd. In fact, most of the pronghorn habitat in the Verde Valley has been fragmented since European settlement.

Historically, there are records of pronghorn herds from Cottonwood east and south through Camp Verde and even up in to Sedona and the Village of Oak Creek area. Currently their habitat is so fragmented from fencelines that the only remnant population of pronghorn we have in the Verde Valley is restricted to the grasslands north of Cottonwood and west of 89A. There is a second population of pronghorn on the Red Rock Ranger District up on Cedar Flats.

The Wranglers are working with Janie Agyagos, Wildlife Biologist on the Red Rock Ranger District, to monitor fencelines and wildlife waters. We are riding fencelines in pronghorn habitat and GPSing where the fences are not in compliance. To meet the wildlife compliance standard the bottom strand of wire must be smooth wire and at least 18" off the ground. For those fences not in compliance, Agyagos and Robert Garcia, Range Conservationist for the Red Rock District, will work with range permittees and volunteer groups to get the unacceptable fence lines modified.

Craig Stevens joined the Wranglers in December 2009. He learned about us through the website of Friends of the Forest's. Craig rides his own horse, a Missouri Fox Trotter named Chester. We rode fenceline together recently and on our lunch break Craig explained to me that while "Living in the Verde Valley and going on trail rides in the most beautiful country in the world is terrific but it's still *just* a trail ride. The Wranglers are exactly what make the great trail rides better. I am now riding with a purpose and riding to help insure the continued existence of the magnificent pronghorn in the Verde Valley, combining my love of riding with an immense sense of self-satisfaction." I couldn't agree with him more.

The Wranglers consist of experienced horse men and women; some who ride Forest Service horses and others who have their own horses. All riders complete multiple trainings throughout the year. Training subjects include horse management, emergency equine first aid, GPS, map and compass, survival as well as trainings on specific projects that we will be involved in. Craig spoke for a lot of us when he said "The training I have received and continue to receive from Janie, the biologist, and the other Forest Service employees and volunteers couldn't be more exhilarating and exciting. I know in my heart I am making a difference."

Many of Craig's friends heard about what he was doing and witnessed first-hand his enthusiasm. As a result we now have another seven riders who have their own horses and share their friend's feelings that they want to accomplish something when they ride. Their dedication has been a real shot in the arm for the program. This influx of riders with their own horses into the program has enabled The Wranglers to

accomplish projects at a much faster rate. The Forest Service has only three horses so we are very limited how much we can get done.

Cattle range water improvements are important for all kinds of wildlife, but especially for the lactating female pronghorn as she stays within 1/2 mile of water. The Wranglers are also conducting an inventory of all open water storage tanks and troughs to determine whether they have wildlife ramps and whether those ramps meet the new specifications. Open storage tanks and troughs can mean certain death to small critters if escape ramps aren't properly installed. Old ideas of suitable ramps varied from a piece of wood floating around in the tank to a linear piece of metal ramp extending from the bottom of the tank up to the rim.

Current research shows that when small animals fall into tanks or troughs, they swim to the nearest edge and then continue around the perimeter. Old types of ramps don't intersect the water at the edge of the tank so the critters don't intersect with the ramp but rather swim round and round the perimeter, under the ramp, until they eventually tire and drown. New ramp specifications involve a piece of expanded metal that not only goes from the rim down to the bottom of the structure, but also both sides of the ramp bend down and extend back to be flush with the side of the tank. Once the Forest Service has GPS coordinates for each tank that needs a ramp, they can begin working with Natural Resource Conservation Service to recruit Boy Scout troops and other volunteers to fabricate and install ramps.

Friends of the Forest welcomes new members. For more information, visit our website at www.friendsoftheforestedona.org or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.