

Outdoor Idaho – Idaho Public Television
“Into the Pioneers” aired December 3, 2017, Total program an hour in length.

Into The Pioneers

Pronghorn



Pronghorn, Misnamed Creature of the Pioneers

by Bruce Reichert

Pronghorn are North America's fastest mammal - capable of speeds approaching 60 mph - yet they can't seem to distance themselves from the moniker "antelope."



Pronghorn at base of Pioneers. Photo by Emily Bruneel.

"The first guy who came along thought they looked like antelope," said Todd Stefanic, biologist for the Craters of the Moon National Monument. "When you first get to describe a species, you get to choose the genus species. And he decided *antilocapra americana* was going to be a good name. Only later did we realize they're not antelope. Antelope live in Africa. This thing's closest relative is actually a giraffe!"

We interviewed Stefanic for our show, "Into the Pioneers." We were intrigued by his description of "pronghorn pass," on Craters of the Moon property.

"I know between which sagebrush and which rock they're going to come every spring and every fall. It's the narrowest constriction point for pronghorn migrating from their winter range on the Idaho National Laboratory, over in the big desert, over to their summer range, north of Carey," he says.

Stefanic has set up three cameras, to catch their migration. "It's an extremely unique opportunity. I can count every animal coming and going each spring and fall. It's a pretty beaten down trail, and they come through here single file. They've got a leader, and they get behind them, and they're not messing around. I think they're worried about predators here in the mountains to the north of us and Sunset Cone to the south, and all this rocky stuff around here. So they get in single file line, and they'll do this in a day, from one end of Craters to the other, about nine miles. And they'll make that in a day. They want to get back to the flat plains, where they can see a long ways and run fast and get away."



Photo courtesy Todd Stefanic's trail cam



Photo courtesy Todd Stefanic's trail cam



Photo courtesy Todd Stefanic's trail cam



Photo courtesy Todd Stefanic's trail cam

Stefanic may not know the exact day the pronghorn will come through Pronghorn Pass – that depends on the snow level in their winter range – but he does know the time of day. "In the spring, when they're going to their summer range, they're going to come through here between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00; that's the peak. When they're going the other way back to their winter range, it's around 2:00 in the afternoon."

There are a lot of "gee-whiz" facts about these skittish creatures that inhabit the Pioneers. Early explorers called them "speed goats." They can cruise along at 45 miles an hour. "They can do short bursts of 60 miles an hour," says Stefanic. "But not many people know the reason for that speed. It's because there used to be a North American cheetah, and that was their main predator, and they had to be faster than them."



Pronghorn. Video still by Jay Krajic

They receive their name from their pronged horns, which are hollow, unlike antlers. Both sexes sport those backward-curving horns, which split to form forward-pointing prongs that give the pronghorn its name.

And they don't like to jump fences, which can be a real problem for ranchers, who rely upon fences to keep their animals enclosed. "They never evolved out on the plains having to jump anything," says Stefanic, "so they come to a fence, and they would often stack up and not know what to do. So they want to go under a fence. So now when we build a fence out here, the bottom wire is 18 inches off the ground, and it's smooth wire, no barbs.

"In fact, there's instances in Wyoming, when the early settlers came, and they were going to raise sheep, and they built these woven wire sheep fences. And unbeknownst to them, they built it across the migration route. When the pronghorn came back to migrate, they stacked up along the fence and starved to death by the hundreds because they wouldn't jump that fence."



Tess O'Sullivan on Flat Top Ranch.
Photo by Emily Bruneel.

Another gee-whiz fact about pronghorn: "They have this incredible eyesight," says Tess O'Sullivan of The Nature Conservancy. "They can detect humans and other things from three to four miles away. They're a fairly small animal, but their eyeball is as large as a horse.

"And they have these incredibly dense bones. Compared to a cow, their bones are twice as dense and half as wide or large," says O'Sullivan. "That helps them be able to run across at such speeds."

O'Sullivan says adult pronghorn keep the fawns hidden in the sagebrush, "because if they're detected, they're just really vulnerable. So the moms will leave them and come and nurse for 30 seconds and then leave them for five hours."

If you come across a fawn, don't assume it's been abandoned. O'Sullivan's advice: "if you ever are lucky enough to happen upon a small animal that's just hidden in the sagebrush, just take a quick look and then back away and leave it alone."

Oh, and if you want to get a photograph of this elusive creature, you might want to wear a white shirt. "They like white," says O'Sullivan; "it's an attractant, for sure. I've heard this from multiple people."

Now about their migration, which is quite remarkable in itself. During 2008-2011, a team of researchers used GPS tracking collars to reveal one of this animal's longest migration routes. Scientists from the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Lava Lake Institute, Idaho Department of Fish & Game, and the Pioneers Alliance mapped a route that passes along the northern edge of the Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve (see map below).

Every spring hundreds of pronghorn travel west to reach their summer range in the Pioneer Mountain foothills. In the fall, they head back to their winter range near Arco and the Idaho National Laboratory.



Biologist Todd Stefanic with camera at Pronghorn Pass.
Video still by Peter Morrill.

"It's also unique because, unlike how people think of most migration as being a north south movement, this is an east west movement," said Todd Stefanic. "It's based more on elevation than latitude. They're going up into the foothills of the Pioneers, north of Carey, and that's where they're going to spend their summers."

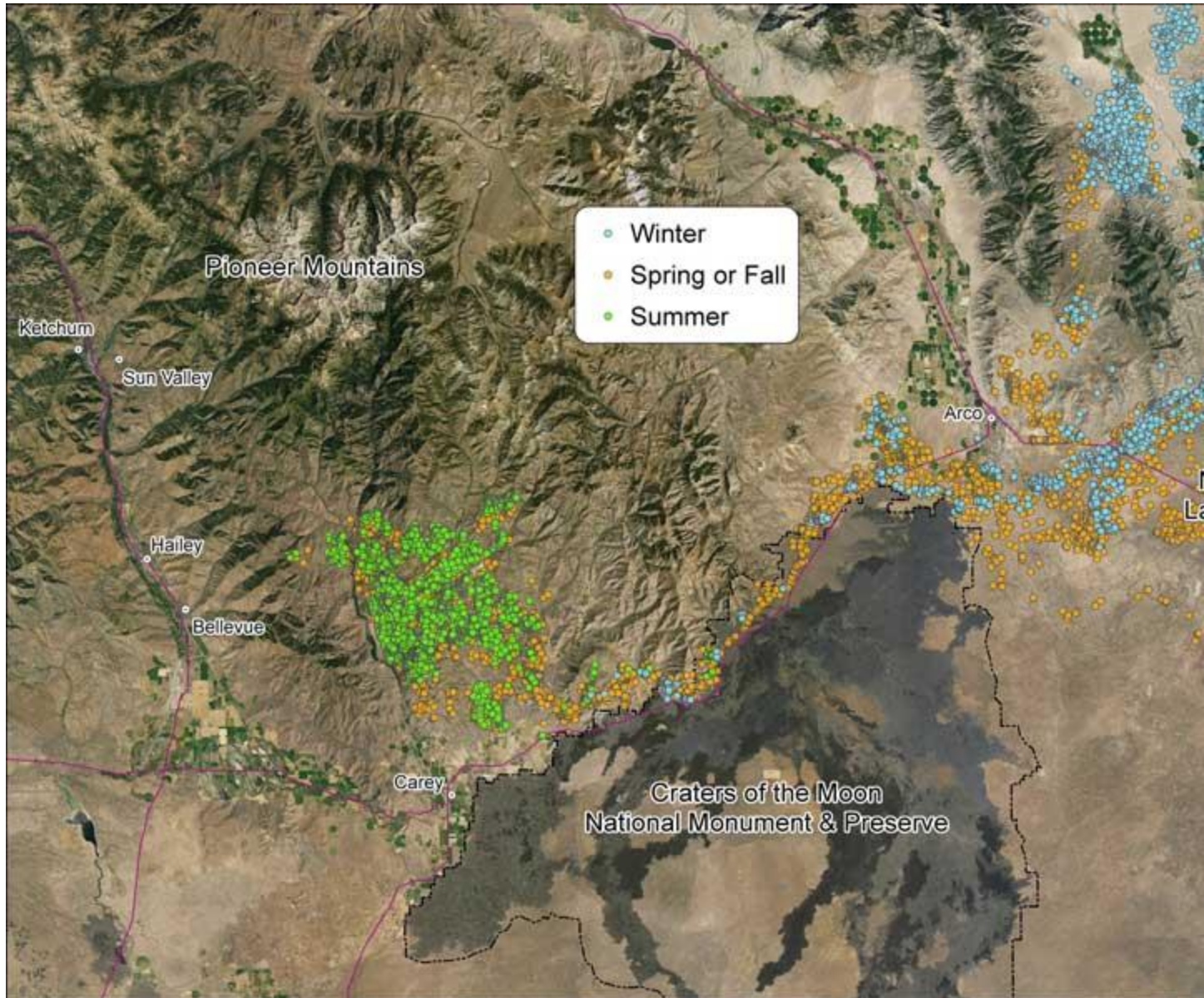
For the last several years, Stefanic has been studying their migration patterns by documenting their movements near Craters of the Moon, using motion-activated cameras. He calls them "inconsistent migrators," because their migration patterns can change from year to year.

"They don't have that great of a fidelity to a winter range, so they may choose to leave the winter range on the Idaho National Laboratory and follow somebody going this way. They might go up Birch Creek or up to Lemhi to a different summer range. And we haven't quite got a handle on

that yet. It would take a whole lot of GPS collars to figure that out! They're one of my favorite animals to study. There's just so much about them that is unique and different."

And, unlike some animals, the pronghorn seem to be thriving, as scientists, land managers, and ranchers learn more about this unusual creature.

"I am optimistic for the pronghorn," says Nature Conservancy's Tess O'Sullivan. "I do think they have a lot of great habitat. I think the biggest challenges they're facing are the winter range and their migration corridor. But of all the wildlife species, they seem to be doing pretty well."



Pronghorn Migration Map



Pronghorn at base of Pioneers. Photo by Emily Bruneel.