

# Colville tribes' risky bid: bring back pronghorn antelope

February 16 2016, by Lynda V. Mapes, The Seattle Times

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For some 8,000 years, pronghorn antelope were at home under the open skies and on the sagebrush steppe that today is part of the Colville Indian reservation.

Bones of the continent's fastest land mammal are found in archaeological sites on the reservation, documenting the [animals'](#) importance to the people here.

But pronghorn have been locally extinct in Washington since the early 1900s, victims of over-hunting, agricultural development and other disturbances after white settlement.

In a risky bid 15 years in the making to bring pronghorn back to their lands, Colville biologists returned last month from a foray to Nevada, to release 52 captured pronghorn in tow. The animals are notoriously sensitive and difficult to relocate. Already, 11 of the animals have died.

Some were caught in fences, or likely the snow and predators did them in. Others, though, were found in the middle of open country, where they could have escaped any predator - suggesting other causes, including the stress of the capture, said Eric Krausz, wildlife biologist for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.

"We are doing our due diligence to understand exactly what some of the causes were. Hopefully it will teach us and other wildlife managers how to handle pronghorn during capture."

The tribe had planned to bring in 100 pronghorn but decided to do the relocation in two stages. "We will learn what the first group does," Krausz said. "Then adjust for the second year."

The confederation of 12 distinct tribes at Colville includes seven native peoples whose ancestral lands in Eastern Washington and British Columbia historically abounded with pronghorn.

Pronghorn are important as a food source, and a spirit animal interwoven with tribal culture, said Guy Moura, program manager of the department of history and archaeology at Colville.

"The way our fish and wildlife program looks at this, it's part of the natural environment and bringing things back to the way they were. That is important from an ecological sense, as well as there had to be spiritual connections," Moura said. "That was lost when pronghorn left, and when they return again, it will develop." In that way, bringing pronghorn back to the reservation is part of a vision that considers the tribe's cultural fabric and landscape as an interwoven whole; the health of each influences the other.

"This isn't just about bringing an animal back to a place," said Krausz. "It is about bringing them back to a people."

The relocation started in the high desert of Nevada, where, using a rocket-fired net gun, biologists in four hours gathered pronghorn genetically suited for release in the sagebrush lands in the southwestern corner of the Colville reservation. Fires that devastated forestland on the reservation last summer were miles away and didn't affect the animals' new habitat.

The capture was a whirlwind, starting with a 14-hour drive to Nevada. The helicopter and capture crew were in the air at first light, with

multiple trucks and three livestock trailers staged in the field.

Net gunners captured the pronghorn, then lifted anywhere from one to five of the animals at a time in slings to a central outdoor workstation, according to Kodi Jo Jaspers, resource-protection biologist for the tribes.

Once the nets were lowered to the ground, helpers untangled the pronghorn, blindfolded the animals to calm them and hobbled their feet. Then biologists put radio collars on the adults and yearlings, took blood samples for DNA and disease testing, and administered shots of antibiotics.

The collars have a battery life of four years. They're expected to help wildlife staff understand the animals' daily and seasonal movement, and alert them to any deaths. Fawns were not collared because they are too small.

After the initial workup, the animals were loaded into livestock trailers and their blindfolds and hobbles removed for the trip back in darkened trailers to the reservation. It was tricky work; pronghorn have notoriously delicate legs, Krausz said.

The Washington State Game Department, which preceded the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, tried and failed three times to reintroduce pronghorn to Washington: once at the Yakima Training Center in the 1930s; in 1950 in Asotin County near Ritzville; and then again in 1968, with a release in Kittitas and Grant counties.

None of those animals were known to survive past the mid-1980s, according to the department.

The Colville decided to make their move in winter, to reduce danger of the animals overheating. After capture, the pronghorn were closely

watched for heat stress, and biologists packed the haunches of some animals with snow to cool them. Then it was time to hit the road, driving straight through to the reservation, with the bucks in one trailer, does and fawns in the others.

The pronghorn now have the task of learning their new landscape and its dangers, from predators to fences.

Richard Whitney, wildlife manager for the tribes, said the pronghorn are not expected to compete with elk, deer or moose already on the reservation because their diets are slightly different.

The pronghorn were released in shrub-steppe habitat with draws and drainages lush with bitterbrush, basin big sage, and three-tipped sagebrush, along with other undergrowth and native perennial grasses. Those should all provide good forage and cover for the pronghorn. There is plenty of water, too.

For now the tribe will closely monitor the collared pronghorn to see how the animals and their lands respond to one another. "We want stable and productive populations," Krausz said. Hunting is not presently in the cards.

"We are returning a species to an ecosystem that hasn't seen it for some time, and it will be interesting to see how the ecosystem responds, how everything responds," he said.

The Yakama Nation brought 99 pronghorn back to their lands in a reintroduction effort launched in January 2011. Those pronghorn were the first to grace their reservation in more than 100 years. In a joint survey last winter by the tribe and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, about 150 pronghorn were located on and off the reservation, said Nate Pamplin, assistant director of the department and manager of

the state's wildlife program. "Initial indications are that a small herd is on its way to being established," Pamplin said.

The pronghorn relocations are part of a bigger picture of tribes, state and federal agencies, private conservation groups, zoos and even Washington prison inmates working in a variety of programs intended to help put back together the assemblage of native wildlife of Washington. They are rebuilding populations of animals from Western bluebirds to pygmy rabbits, Western pond turtles to Oregon spotted frogs, fishers, sea otters, sage grouse, sharp tailed grouse, and more. "We are strong supporters of having a biologically diverse suite of species on the landscape," Pamplin said of the department.

"It contributes to the overall quality of life for our citizens who get to go out and see those species or have satisfaction in knowing an ecosystem is intact."

The Colville also have reintroduced bighorn sheep to their [ancestral lands](#), and boosted elk with reintroduction of animals from South Dakota that are the base of the tribe's herd, flourishing at more than 1,000 animals today. The tribe also is considering bringing back Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep and mountain goats someday. Wolves already have made it back on their own, with two known packs locally.

"Any time a wild creature can be reintroduced to its native habitat, that is a good thing," said Randall Friedlander, director for the tribes' wildlife program.

The pronghorn were relocated to lands purchased by the tribe using funds from the Bonneville Power Administration to offset damage to wildlife habitat from the Grand Coulee and Chief Joseph hydropower projects.

There was no charge for the [pronghorn](#), gifted from Nevada as part of an overall effort to conserve and benefit the species. The Colville tribe paid for the helicopter time and other capture costs.

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Citation: Colville tribes' risky bid: bring back pronghorn antelope (2016, February 16) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-02-colville-tribes-risky-pronghorn-antelope.html>

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