

Fastest Hooves in the West! – S2E7

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:08] Hello. Welcome to a Talk on the Wild Side, your bi weekly tour, of all things, Wild in Texas. I'll be your host. I'm Sandra Rideout-Hanzak.

Georgi Eccles [00:00:16] And I'm your co-host, Georgi Eccles.

Andrew Lowery [00:00:18] Howdy. Howdy. And I'm Andrew Lowery.

Georgi Eccles [00:00:21] Hello.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:22] Hey, what's up, everybody?

Andrew Lowery [00:00:23] Not a whole lot, guys. The temperatures come down a little bit, the water levels come up a little bit. Things are leveling out. It's not so bad. Mm.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:31] And the undergrads are back. Yay!

Georgi Eccles [00:00:35] I was saying to you guys a little bit earlier. It's taken me a few extra minutes to get here since I'm dodging all the undergrads on my usual route. Not that I usually dodge them, it's just there's more people on campus.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:46] So do you usually just drive right over or just...

Georgi Eccles [00:00:50] Go through them? Yeah. No, definitely not.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:53] Just blare your horn?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:56] That's funny.

Georgi Eccles [00:00:57] No, I work here, so I just have to walk really fast and, like, you know, go across the turf and the grass instead of the usual pathways. Yeah, I like undergrads. Don't get me wrong, guys.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:08] I do, too. I'm glad they're here. It just. It changes the traffic in town.

Andrew Lowery [00:01:12] Yeah. You guys don't have to lie. I can edit this out.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:19] No, it's just we're such a small town.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:20] Town that it completely changes the town.

Georgi Eccles [00:01:24] It's odd. Oh, my goodness. All right, well, I'm doing What's Wild and new in Texas this week.

Andrew Lowery [00:01:31] Well, guys, we have a new invasive species in Texas waters today.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:36] Wow just what we need another invader.

Georgi Eccles [00:01:40] Hmm. Seems like we're having some accumulating issues in Texas, especially with our waters at the moment. First of all, the droughts that we had and the water levels hitting historic lows and it seems we have discussed a few invasive aquatic species as well recently. So. Oh.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:56] Yeah, it's a really complex issue. The biggest part is Texas is huge for one thing, and they're just a lot of moving parts.

Andrew Lowery [00:02:03] Very, very true, Sandra. And yeah, Georgi, we have a lot of water and a lot of people. And so animals and plants and, you know, things, they end up all over the place.

Georgi Eccles [00:02:13] So what're we talking about today is like an animal, animal or like a mollusk.

Andrew Lowery [00:02:19] Ouch, Georgi what do you have against mollusk?

Georgi Eccles [00:02:23] Oh, I don't know. Kind of the first word that came into my head, I think.

Andrew Lowery [00:02:27] Okay. Well, you know I think they're cute. I like mollusk. But that's not what we're talking about today. As of August 11th of this year, the Australian Red Claw crayfish has been found living in Texas waters. Between the months of January and February. Texas Parks and Wildlife collected three specimens from an apartment complex pond in the Brownsville, Texas, area.

Georgi Eccles [00:02:46] So it's a crustacean, huh?

Andrew Lowery [00:02:49] Yeah. So what's your point, Georgi?

Georgi Eccles [00:02:53] You're not really far off from a mollusk, then.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:02:57] Oh, my God, you're killing me.

Andrew Lowery [00:03:00] I'm not sure. I think all this shellfish talk is making me a little crabby.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:05] Oh, I should've seen that one coming.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:13] Anybody who's not here, these two just have the giggles. Y'all just crack me up. I'm usually the one with the giggles. Okay.

Andrew Lowery [00:03:20] Okay.

Georgi Eccles [00:03:21] Oh, jokes aside, what else do we know about these crayfish?

Andrew Lowery [00:03:24] Well, we know Texas Parks and Wildlife has collected both male and female crayfish. So sadly, there is the potential for an already established breeding population to be present. Hmm.

Georgi Eccles [00:03:34] And how did these guys get here?

Andrew Lowery [00:03:36] Well, we have a pretty good idea. A quick Google search shows you can buy these guys pretty easy online. The exact species in question, they make up a portion of the aquarium trade. So more than likely, they were placed there by someone thinking they were, you know, helping the animal out.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:50] Yeah. Oh, my gosh. Same old story. How many times have we talked about this? Don't dump your tanks, people just don't do it.

Georgi Eccles [00:03:58] Yeah, there's definitely alternatives. And there's lots of information online that you can find advice on how you can properly dispose of potentially problem species, right?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:04:07] Yeah.

Andrew Lowery [00:04:08] Yeah. Guys, be responsible Pet owners don't allow pets to become pets.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:04:13] So on a positive note, what do you have for us today, Georgi?

Georgi Eccles [00:04:18] If you have ever traveled through the enormous stretches of prairie habitat situated in central to western portions of the U.S., you may have been lucky to have spotted one of the most unique animals of the United States, the pronghorn. Looking at these animals, you may have thought, huh? That's an odd looking deer. But in fact, Pronghorn are in a class of their own. Yes, Pronghorn do look a little bit like deer in some ways, as they have a similar body shape. Long legs with a short tail and snout, plus further is typically reddish brown tan or darker brown, as you may have guessed already, is the name that makes a pronghorn. Well, a pronghorn. These creatures have short horns at the top of their head, which are projecting prongs, pointing backwards towards their room and shorter prongs. Projecting forward. It kind of looks like two great black crab claws protruding from their heads. It's no surprise, then, that these features are used for protection against predators and other instances where they need to defend themselves. In addition to their reddish brown fur, brown horns have white stripes on their necks with additional white markings on their face, stomachs on the rumps. But why have an adorable white that looks like a corgi butt? Well, this does indeed serve a purpose. Pronghorn have great vision. And when spotting a predator, the Pronghorn can raise up their adorable white rump, making their butt appear fluffier and larger, sending out this signal to the pronghorn towards them about incoming danger. What a great asset to have. Pronghorn is a special because they're the only surviving member of the family group. Antilocapridae translates to antelope goat. While the pronghorn are distantly related to the antelope and the goat, they are neither astoundingly as a member of superfamily Giraffidae. The closest living relatives to pronghorn, to giraffes and Okapi. Who knew? Described sometimes as to speed goats or as prairie rockets, pronghorn are considered the fastest land animal in North America and the second fastest land animal compared to the cheetah. However, Pronghorn can sustain those speeds for much longer than a cheetah can, making the cheetah look like the chubby kid at a school race compared to the athletic endurance of a pronghorn. So if you want to get close to a wild pronghorn, you're going to have to be pretty stealthy. On the northern Great Plains, Pronghorn inhabit the ancestral land of several tribal nations the Blackfoot nation in Browning, Montana, have a legend that tells how their god, Old Man, created the pronghorn on the slopes of the Rockies. But when he turned the animal loose, its great speed caused it to stumble and fall on the rocks and the fallen timber of the mountain. So old man move the pronghorn to the prairie where it was

content. And so Pronghorn, along with bison, ruled the plains, while bison preferred prairie grasses. Pronghorn ate the broadleaf plants or Forbes sagebrush and shrubs grazing by bison allowed the remaining Forbes to grow and develop. So Pronghorn moved in the wake of the buffalo eats in the flourishing forms that were left behind. Pronghorn often play the roles of messengers in tribal culture, and the appearance of a pronghorn in human settlement is a meaning of a message from the spirit world. The Pronghorn continues to play a part in ceremonial life of many Western indigenous people, including the Pueblo and Hopi of the Southwest. I hope you agree already that Pronghorn is just fascinating, right? And this is just the intro. So get comfy, turn up the volume and be ready. Thrilled for all things wild and Pronghorn. Let's get to it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:07:43] I'm here with Shawn Gray today. Shawn is the Mule Deer and Pronghorn Program Leader at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Hi, Shawn. Thanks for taking the time to join us today.

Shawn Gray [00:07:54] Yes, Sandra, thanks for having me.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:07:56] Yeah, well, I'm really looking forward to talking about what you do. So let's start with that first. Just tell us what you do as the Mule Deer and Pronghorn Program Leader at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Shawn Gray [00:08:09] Yeah. So I oversee the management and research of mule deer and pronghorn for the department. So we do annual survey. We collect data from harvested animals. We use all that information on the management side of things to make potential regulation changes for the species. And then on the research side, I work with lots of our universities here in the state, like Texas A&M-Kingsville or Texas State University and Texas Tech and Texas A&M on dated research for mule deer and pronghorn. So we can better manage for those species in the long term. So I'm kind of the liaison of for the department on the research side, and that's pretty much my job in a nutshell.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:09:10] Okay. How long have you been doing that?

Shawn Gray [00:09:13] I've been in this position since November of 2009.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:09:18] Wow. Okay, that's a good long time. You must like it.

Shawn Gray [00:09:23] Oh, I love it. Very blessed. I work with a lot of great people.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:09:27] That's good. That's good to know. So, you know, when I was young, I grew up in Indiana, and we would take these long car trips out west, like two weeks, three weeks, sometimes four weeks. We would be gone just, you know, on these car trips and we would just call it, you know, going west. We're going to go west this summer. And I would finally feel like we were in the West when I saw that first pronghorn off in the distance. You know, you see that first silhouette up there on the mesa and you're like, Oh, we're here, we're in the west, you know? And it's just such an iconic creature that that's what I want to talk to you about today. But, you know, when I was a kid, we always called them antelope. And so I wanted to start with that. What is a pronghorn? Because I think maybe "antelope" is not a proper term, is it?

Shawn Gray [00:10:21] Yeah. Pronghorn is a majestic icon of our grasslands, and it's an awesome animal. It's just. I love them. Yeah. They're just so unique and obviously only found in North America, but they're definitely not an antelope. I even call them antelope when I'm talking to hunters and stuff because they say antelope.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:10:45] okay.

Shawn Gray [00:10:48] So it just kind of depends on who I'm talking to. I mostly say Pronghorn, but sometimes I'll let them say antelope. But that's not a big deal. We know what we're talking about. Sure, but yeah. Taxonomically, they're not an antelope. They're in their own family. They're the only mammal that sheds its horns. So there are a lot of cool things about Pronghorn that may make them just unique in themselves. So.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:11:21] Okay, so it's a horn, not a antler. But they shed it. Do they shed it?

Shawn Gray [00:11:27] Yes, yep, yep. Shed it every year all the bucks do and most of the females do.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:11:33] Really. Yeah. So why is it a horn then and not an antler? What's the difference between a horn and an antler.

Shawn Gray [00:11:41] Well, the sheaths on the pronghorn are made from hair and then, you know, basically your antler is a bone.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:11:50] Okay. All right. I did not know that. So where do you find pronghorn? What habitat do they live in?

Shawn Gray [00:11:58] Grasslands and grassland savannah. Um, I grew up in the panhandle, so I have an affinity for flat, open spaces. You know, they don't have it. The more, I guess I wouldn't call it rugged, but more kind of like rolling terrain. And then they'll, they'll inhabit some shrub land. But the shrubs have to be pretty short, you know, like, like sagebrush short. But yeah, they're definitely a grassland obligate species.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:12:32] All right. And, you know, when we talk about wildlife, one of the things that that all wildlife need, one of those basic things, is cover. So what is cover for a pronghorn? This is something I've always wondered about.

Shawn Gray [00:12:48] It doesn't really take much. It could be a yucca; it could be cactus. Just a little bit of shade. Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:12:57] Okay.

Shawn Gray [00:12:59] And really, you know, even in a hot day, you'll see them out in the sun too. But mostly that cover, it's primarily more important to fawns, hiding fawns from, you know, their main predator. Or predators.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:13:20] Okay. And what about more specifically, what about escape cover? Is that just wide open space or what?

Shawn Gray [00:13:27] Wide open space. Yep. Okay. That's escape cover for a pronghorn.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:13:31] All right.

Shawn Gray [00:13:32] They want to outrun you. Okay. Yeah. They want to see you and outrun you.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:13:36] What do they want to outrun? Who are their predators?

Shawn Gray [00:13:42] Primarily coyote, I guess. You know, a long, long time ago, there was there's I guess the thought that they evolved with the American cheetah. But I don't even know if that's right. That's really a common theory now. But I guess a while back that was kind of what was thought. The reason why pronghorn are so fast. But anyway.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:14:11] Okay, so are coyotes a big deal. I mean, are they only an issue for the fawns or what?

Shawn Gray [00:14:20] Primarily, yeah. But they also do take adults these are very smart and resilient animals. And they can use fences against pronghorn. They can get them in a corner and then take them down that way, too.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:14:42] Okay.

Shawn Gray [00:14:43] Just because pronghorn, you know, they. They have a hard time navigating through a fence. And they want to go underneath a fence rather than jump up there. Some of them do jump out, but for the most part, they want to go under it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:15:02] Okay, so since you brought that up, what's a pronghorn-friendly fence look like?

Shawn Gray [00:15:08] So it'd be the bottom of the fence would need to be a minimum of 18 inches off the ground would be ideal. Higher is better. 20 to 22 inches would be great. Okay. You want it to be high enough to where they can cross with still some momentum, where they don't have to slow down very much if they're being chased

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:15:38] Okay. And that would still be workable for. For cattle ranchers.

Shawn Gray [00:15:43] Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. We've put in a lot of pronghorn-friendly fences in the Trans-Pecos and in the Panhandle, too. But through NRCS cost-share and your other cost-share programs that we've worked with or with other partners like NEP, with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, our Landowner Incentive Program, a bunch of programs like that have helped landowners share to remove those restrictive fences to replace with more pronghorn passable fencing.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:16:27] Oh, that's great. I didn't realize there were cost share programs to help with that.

Shawn Gray [00:16:32] Yeah. In fact, over the last few years, we've really ramped that up through the help of the network program. They have a peak. It's I think it's the peak. It's River Watershed Initiative. And they're really pumping a lot of money into this area for grassland restoration.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:16:58] Okay. Should people just reach out to their county NRCS office if they're interested in that?

Shawn Gray [00:17:05] Yeah, they can they can reach out to their local TPW biologists as well.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:17:10] Oh, okay.

Shawn Gray [00:17:11] Yeah, we all work together.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:17:13] Okay, great. That's yeah, that sounds like a terrific resource. So another thing about pronghorn and just how they live, are they mostly solitary or are they herd animals?

Shawn Gray [00:17:28] Yeah, they're mostly herd animals. They're very gregarious. The only times of the year that they would be solitary would be when does are going to go fawn, they'll have their baby. And then, within probably a few days they're back in groups. So it's probably maybe just a week window where they're out by themselves, finding some bonding cover and then having a baby and then a few days later go in and join the group. Okay. And then during the breeding season, I would say like the subordinate male would be kicked out of territories like the younger males. And they might they might be out by themselves or they might be out with a little small group of younger males. But other than that Pronghorn barn, one pronghorn you're going to find multiple.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:18:24] Now they're a game species in in parts of the panhandle. Is that right?

Shawn Gray [00:18:30] Oh yeah. In all of Texas they are big game species. Yup, and we issued permits to landowners and or their agent for hunting pronghorn.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:18:46] How does somebody is interested in a pronghorn hunt? How would they go about, you know, getting into that?

Shawn Gray [00:18:56] So from the landowner side, they apply for permits every year. And the way we issue those permits, we do our population surveys with an airplane, and then we estimate our population numbers within a specific area, what we call a herd unit. And then based on those numbers, we issued permits directly to the landowner or landowners agent. However, they make up within that herd unit. They are a landowner owns 50% of the acreage is then the herd unit. Then he would get 50% of those permits.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:19:39] Okay.

Shawn Gray [00:19:40] So that's kind of the landowners side and the hunter side where we have what we call a "lease list," where every year we ask these landowners, Hey, would you want to be put on our lease list? Are you looking for hunters? And after we issue permits, we'll put that on our web page. And so hunters can check that. And then we have a public hunting opportunity and block of grasslands that people can apply for, hunters can apply for.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:20:17] Is that a lottery program?

Shawn Gray [00:20:19] It is, yeah. And odds are very low. But, you won't get drawn if you don't put in right.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:20:28] Somebody gets drawn, right?

Shawn Gray [00:20:31] Somebody gets drawn. Typically, it's somewhere between 10 to 15 permits, and it's a great, it's awesome pronghorn habitat.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:20:43] Wow. You've mentioned population surveys. I think I'm not sure, but I think pronghorn are coming back, you know, in throughout parts of Texas. Where are they now? Where do we find them? In Texas?

Shawn Gray [00:21:00] Yeah. Primarily the panhandle. So, like, probably the Post area. There's some pockets, and then on the southeast side of it, west a little bit. And then pretty much like Hereford area. Mm hmm. There's a pretty good pocket of pronghorn there. And then Dalhart Pampa areas are pretty much our stronghold up in the panhandle. Okay. And then the Trans-Pecos would be the Marshall Plateau right around Alpine and then parts of Culberson and Hudspeth County. And then we have we kind of have a disjunct herd over west of San Angelo. We've been working with that. It's a big ranch there, Rocker Ranch.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:21:59] We talked about CWD on one of our episodes. We talked to Mitch Lockhart, and you got me wondering about antelope. Are they susceptible to Chronic Wasting Disease? Do we know? What's the deal with them?

Shawn Gray [00:22:26] Yeah. Good old CWD. So what we know now, uh, there's no evidence that pronghorn would be susceptible to CWD. We were actually. I had given some samples to Texas Tech, some pronghorn samples that we pulled from animals that we translocated and whatnot in our capture event. And so they're going to look at that. They're going to look at like, Oh, I can't remember which codons they are for deer like codon on 96 or two, 25 or whatever. Wherever that susceptibility is in the genetic code. They were going to look and see if Pronghorn have that. But again, just because they have, that doesn't mean that they would be susceptible. But from, I guess from all of the real world stuff that we've been doing or know of. There's been no reports. There's been no sightings of a of a clinical type pronghorn. I know Wyoming a long time ago has done some testing in Pronghorn and never found any. So I guess you never say never. But the evidence that we have right now is there's no reason to be concerned about pronghorn.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:24:02] Well, that's good to know. Yeah, I'm sure it's a big relief for all of you guys.

Shawn Gray [00:24:09] It is. CWD in itself is a monster anyway.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:24:15] Yeah. Yeah, it's terrible. Fingers crossed that it's never found in Pronghorn. We've got another problem this year. We're in a big drought throughout much of the state. Is drought an issue for Pronghorn? Do they adjust, you know, take it in stride?

Shawn Gray [00:24:33] Absolutely.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:24:34] How do they deal with drought?

Shawn Gray [00:24:36] Yeah, drought. Drought can really impact pronghorn numbers. Specifically from production. Yeah. And then, if it's if it's too severe, then adults really succumb to it as well. Remember, we're talking about that this year. So if Pronghorn are restricted in their movement and they're stuck to one area, then they're not able to go out and find those little isolated rainshowers or maybe a draw that might have some, uh, a little bit of soil moisture left. Mm. To produce some Forbes for them. So Pronghorn have to be able to move about the landscape at will for their long term sustainability. But yeah, I mean, drought, drought is probably the, the drought is the major population driver in our problem populations in the state of Texas, for sure.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:25:38] So when you say that they have to be able to move around, can you put some numbers on that? Like, you know, if we were to talk about how big an area a pronghorn would need, do you have any idea what that is?

Shawn Gray [00:25:52] Yeah. Well, you know, we've done some research on home range and habitat use stuff. It's like average home ranges where females are within probably the like the 8000 acre range or something like that, a little bit lower than male or male, which is weird because most other big game species, the males have a larger home range of females when a pronghorn is the other way around.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:26:25] Really?

Shawn Gray [00:26:27] Yeah. Pretty cool. That's primarily because the herds set these territories up for rut and then during the rut, so they don't really move outside of territory.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:26:41] Okay. And so is the female moving around and in different male home ranges?

Shawn Gray [00:26:46] Yes. Yep. Yeah. That's there's a lot of social mixing within the different groups of pronghorn, but yeah. So, and then, you know, a translocated animal's going to move regardless because of, you know, it's trying to figure out its new home, and all kinds of things like that. But, I mean, we've had animals move dispersed out like 40 something miles from where they released. And, in fact, just last week, uh, we saw a tagged animal that was released. Probably that 40 mile range went across a major highway. And where it was last week. Pretty good, pretty good distance from where it was released in 2018.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:27:44] But even for animals who aren't translocated, if the females are moving around and using this really large area, does that give her an opportunity to like check out different males during the year? And do you have any evidence that she goes back to favorite males' territory.

Shawn Gray [00:28:06] I have no idea. Yeah. I mean, that's a really great question in the social structure of pronghorn. That I have no idea. I don't even know if anybody knows that. But, um, well, you know, the, the common thought is like the bucks keep the harems with try to keep the harems within his territory, but they move outside of it, you know. So there could be there could be that I mean, that I wouldn't say that could not happen by any means. Yeah. As we like I said, we know so little about their social interaction.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:28:50] Well, if it's an animal that covers that much area, that's a really difficult animal to study to begin with.

Shawn Gray [00:28:57] Yeah. But we got to. Technology is amazing now, though. We got some awesome things that we can utilize to study the pronghorn, lots of aspects of their biology.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:29:15] Uh huh. And I just want to go back. I'm still trying to wrap my head around this 8,000 acres for a female. That's a lot bigger than most single landowners. So if you're trying to restore, you've got to work with multiple landowners, I imagine.

Shawn Gray [00:29:36] Oh, yes, we do. Yeah. And don't get stuck on that number because I don't know if that's exactly right. Well, it's a lot of acreage. It's thousands of acres.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:29:46] It's lots and lots!

Shawn Gray [00:29:48] Lots of acres. Yeah. And that's just pronghorn in general. They just need a lot of back country that's open for them to do well long term. But yeah. And our biologists work hand-in-hand with all of the landowners like within our what we call our restoration area. There'd be 20 some odd landowners in there and everybody's on board with modifying, they're allowing us to do some predator management, allowing us to monitor the animals that we released, you know, the whole gamut of things. And we can get any better cooperation that we've had over the last shoot we've been doing that since really 2011. So we're looking at 11 years of intensive pronghorn management in the Trans-Pecos and even in the Panhandle, too, because we've got we need their cooperation to capture the animal and to bring them down to these depleted areas.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:30:58] So you're moving them from the panhandle to other areas to try to restore populations?

Shawn Gray [00:31:05] Yes. Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:31:06] Does that mean they're plentiful again in the in the panhandle or at least parts of the panhandle then?

Shawn Gray [00:31:12] Yeah, parts of the panhandle. But, you know, here comes the drought thing. And over the last couple or three years of a lot of our surplus herd that's what we call surplus herding and that would be the herding. It's where we feel comfortable about pulling some animals out of without having impact on the population growth. Those have kind of started to decline. Mm hmm. And so we don't want to be pulling animals out of an area that that are declining. It probably be okay. But if it's declining, then we're going to be issuing fewer permits. And then if landowners get fewer permits and then they see us moving animals out of there, then, you know, it's logical to in their in their mind to say, hey, you guys caused that, not the drought. So, yeah, we're trying to be very mindful of all of that. That's in terms of pronghorn management when we make decisions like that.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:32:20] Yeah, that's interesting. So you have to have you had to pull back a little bit then on the on restoration effort.

Shawn Gray [00:32:29] Yeah, we have. Last year, actually, we had one herd unit that looked pretty good, but the ranch that we were using had just been sold. And so there were some issues there. But, uh, but like I said, the, some of those herd units up in the

Dalhart area had been declining. And so we, we said, no, we're not going to use these herd units. Let's go try this other herd doing that. So yeah. And then on the drought side out here, we don't want to translate into a drought conditions if we know it's drought and we don't want to translate into it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:33:08] So that's good point. You don't want to move a new animal to a really rough place for him or her to try to set up housekeeping right away?

Shawn Gray [00:33:19] Yeah, we kind of learned that the hard way in 2011. We didn't, you know, it was just starting to set in when we did it. And we were still hopeful that, you know, it would be an average year, but obviously didn't turn out that way.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:33:35] So how are you feeling about 2022? Are we going to be talking about 2022 and 2033? Like now we talk about 2011? So were you able to were you able to process that thought?

Shawn Gray [00:33:52] Yeah, because I have the same thought. Yeah. You know, in 2011, everyone was saying that this was like a 100-year drought. And then there we are 11 years later. Yeah. But fortunately, I saw the forecast out here. It looks like we got chances of rain. So hopefully this is kicking off our monsoon down the pike and the panhandle has been getting a little bit of rain, too. Hopefully, it's we're turning the corner. I'm hopeful.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:34:26] All right, good. Yeah, fingers crossed, cause it seems like everywhere really needs it right now. I know we do down in the coastal bend.

Shawn Gray [00:34:35] In a tough year, but time for rain.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:34:39] Most definitely. Pronghorn, like I said, are uniquely American and so iconic of the American West, maybe more so than any other wildlife species. But other than that, why should we care about pronghorn or what happens to their populations? Why is it important for you to restore the populations?

Shawn Gray [00:35:03] Well, you know, they're one of the keystone species of our grasslands. So if we lose pronghorn, that means we've lost our grasslands. And losing our grasslands is definitely not a good thing.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:35:15] Yeah. Can you explain that a little bit? What do you mean by "keystone species" and how are grasslands dependent on them?

Shawn Gray [00:35:23] So, you know, it's a total grassland-obligate species where, like I said, it's got to have that open area to survive because that's what they were. That's what they evolved under. Then underneath the pronghorn, you know, we have just because I put pronghorn on a pedestal, because I love Pronghorn so much, but, you know, there are prairie dogs, burrowing owl, other grassland birds, probably the loss of invertebrates and snakes. You know, all of the things that that have evolved underneath that grassland ecosystem, if we lose that one type of animal, if it's gone, then all of those other species aren't going to have the grassland to live in either. And grasslands are very important to everyone.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:36:35] Yeah. I mean, we hear a lot about how important forests are, you know, I think maybe, maybe the general public has gotten that message

that forests are really important for all of us, even if we live in Houston or, you know, in the middle of Dallas or something. But grasslands to. Grasslands are just as important and they're providing just as many ecosystem services.

Shawn Gray [00:36:58] Absolutely.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:37:00] Do you have a favorite fun fact about Longhorns that you'd like to share with us?

Shawn Gray [00:37:08] They taste really good!

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:37:11] Let's go there. What's your favorite way to cook them?.

Shawn Gray [00:37:18] On the grill!

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:37:20] Yeah? On the grill? Just a pronghorn steak?

Shawn Gray [00:37:23] Yes. Yeah, they're just such a mild, mild meat. You know, if you eat deer and their good but pronghorns are lot better. To me with deer it just has that gamey taste, you know, and a lot of people like that. But I don't. I like a more mild taste and pronghorn does not have that game taste whatsoever. And a lot of people that hunt pronghorn don't even really know how good they are to eat. They're just, you know, they're first time pronghorn hunter or they're just only going to kill one, harvest one pronghorn in their lifetime. It's mostly for the experience and then probably for the trophy head of it. They don't understand. Like Pronghorn is really good. And it's common throughout most of pronghorn hunting range where, you know, they say they don't taste very good or this or that. But it probably has to do with how you take care of the meat, too. Most of the pronghorn season is still warm. And if you put up a pronghorn that you just shot in the back of a truck and drive around for a few hours without taking the guts out of it or anything like that or taking care of the animal that you just harvested. It's probably going to be a little bit twangy.

Shawn Gray [00:39:18] If you take care of it is an awesome, awesome game animal. Yeah, to me, it's probably the best out of some of the big game species.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:39:31] Okay, well, now you've got me wanting to try pronghorn because I think I've tasted most every kind of game species except pronghorn.

Shawn Gray [00:39:41] You got to. And then you should have a podcast about it, and then tell everyone how good it is.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:39:51] Well, we'll just refer back to this one! But yeah, no, I really want to do that. So are there companies that sell pronghorn meat or do you have to hunt it?

Shawn Gray [00:40:05] No. You know, that's illegal. You'd have to be the hunter, or be somebody that got it from a hunter.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:45:54] So is there anything in your job that you do today, that. Is really surprising. Like if you were to make a list 15 years ago of the things you think

you're going to do. Is there anything that you wouldn't have realized you were going to have to do?

Shawn Gray [00:46:15] Uh, well, I've been working with the department for, like, 17 years now. But let's go look forward let's say, like, as a student. I would have been surprised to know how much work you do with, with people. It's not. We just don't go out in the field every day and just work with the animal. Uh huh. It's. It's a lot of people management. It's a lot of working with people. It's a lot of trying to build those relationships for the greater good. Yeah. So in my position that's probably the most. Well at least half of my time is spent doing that.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:47:17] So communication skills are a must.

Shawn Gray [00:47:21] Absolutely. But in all aspects of that and trying to get our message to our constituents, um, there's just so many, so many twists and turns on the communication thing for us to be effective in wildlife management that we have to do correctly or if we're not, we fail.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:47:47] Right.

Shawn Gray [00:47:48] So but yeah, that's I think that's probably what would be more surprising when I was sitting in a classroom. Yeah. So in that.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:48:01] Yeah. I think we, you know, when we teach wildlife management classes, we teach that a lot. But I think just hearing us say it, they don't always believe it, you know?

Shawn Gray [00:48:15] As a teacher, it's kind of nice to hear somebody say that. Yeah, you know, I'm communicating with people with landowners all the time. And our field biologist, that's what they do every day.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:48:28] Really?

Shawn Gray [00:48:29] That's what they do every day. Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:48:33] Do you think that's because we're mostly a privately owned state or, you know, when you talk to people from other states, is that a big part of their responsibility too.

Shawn Gray [00:48:45] Uh, from the private side, from private land? So. Absolutely. That's the reason why we deal with the, we work hand in hand with landowners every day because we are a private land state. Counterparts in other states with more public land, they're dealing with the hunters themselves, basically, you know, and all of those aspects of hunting just because it's public land and everybody is their constituent in terms of the land use, basically.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:49:26] So that makes sense. So yeah, a lot of communication, just maybe a different audience.

Shawn Gray [00:49:31] Still communication, but it's a different group of folks that you're working with. They still have private land there, but they don't in my opinion, they don't spend as much time working with landowners as we do in Texas.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:49:56] Well, thank you so much for talking to us. I learned a lot first of all, I never really thought about that thing on their head, whether it was a horn or an antler. Now, I know that it's a horn, but also I know that they shed it every year, which is really mind blowing. But is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?

Shawn Gray [00:50:19] Oh, no. Just enjoy pronghorn, and go hunting! Hey, thanks for having me and I would be happy to do it again anytime

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:50:29] Okay. Thank you, Shawn.

Georgi Eccles [00:50:31] Remember, you better not feed the wildlife.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:50:34] A Talk on the Wild Side is a production of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute of Texas A&M University Kingsville. Funding for this project is provided by the Harvey Weil Sportsman Conservationist Award by the Rotary Club of Corpus Christi. Podcast artwork is created by the talented Gaby Olivas. Tre' Kendall contributes with his creative talents as well, and editing is conducted by Andrew Lowery. For you hardcore fans, we're now putting bloopers at the end. So hang on.

Andrew Lowery [00:51:06] If you listen to the bloopers in our last episode, Dr. Rideout said, you just fry 'em up or you're never going to know how these guys taste.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:51:13] I was just getting ready to say crayfish are pretty tasty. I mean, yeah. What's the problem? Don't dump them. Eat them.

Andrew Lowery [00:51:21] Yeah, guys. Be responsible. Pet owners, don't allow pets to become pests.