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WILDLIFE:
Pronghorn breeding program reaches milestone with latest relocations

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Up to a dozen endangered Sonoran pronghorn will be released into Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona, representing a significant step forward in the recovery of the species, according to federal officials.

Five pronghorn have already been rounded up from a semi-captive breeding facility on the adjacent Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, after which they were flown 20 miles by helicopter and released onto the national monument last month.

Wildlife biologists expect to capture up to seven more animals for transfer this week, making the effort the largest release of captive-bred pronghorn into the wild since the breeding program began in 2004.

“Releasing healthy adults into the wild where they have historically occurred is just fantastic news for the recovery of the species,” said Mark Sturm, chief of resources at the Organ Pipe Cactus monument, which covers more than 330,000 acres of rugged desert along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Endangered Sonoran pronghorn roam Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona. A relocation effort involving captive-bred pronghorn promises to restore a historic migration route between Organ Pipe National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. Photo courtesy of National Park Service.

Once widespread throughout the West, pronghorn nearly went extinct due to competition from cattle for food supplies as well as habitat fragmentation and degradation. The Sonoran subspecies, which exists in Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, was listed as endangered in 1967.

The U.S. population was nearly wiped out in 2002 after an extended drought reduced the herd to 21 individuals. The wild population now stands at around 100 in the United States, according to a 2010 survey.

To recover the species, a multi-agency team is working to establish several populations of Sonoran pronghorn across their historical range through a captive breeding and release program. The goal is to eventually have 300 wild Sonoran pronghorn in the United States.

The captive breeding program has been considered successful, reaching full capacity with 100 animals in 2009 and 2010, said Sid Slone, manager of the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, where the breeding facility is located.

The pronghorn are protected from coyotes and other predators in a 1-square-mile pen. In addition to feeding on native vegetation, the animals are given water and alfalfa. Under such conditions, almost all of the fawns born in the facility survive, as compared to a typical 20 percent in the wild, Slone said.

In December, a dozen animals were transported from Cabeza Prieta to the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge near Yuma, Ariz., to establish a second captive breeding site, the first major step toward establishing between three and five separate populations.

Transportation is a tricky process; pronghorn are easily stressed, so they must be handled gently and transported by air across the Barry M. Goldwater military complex, which requires coordination with the Defense Department, Slone said.

Restoring a migration route

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument is the farthest relocation site from the Cabeza Prieta captive breeding facility to date. But wildlife managers believe the pronghorn once migrated from the refuge area to the monument site during the summer when rain was abundant.

“We’re hoping to establish a core population in Organ Pipe that will move back and forth,” Slone said.

Conditions are ripe for success -- good summer rains have caused vegetation to flourish in the national monument. “Everything is in place for these animals to adjust to their new environment and do well,” Sturm said.

The few pronghorn that have been released closer to the breeding facility over the past three years continue to have better reproductive success than the wild ones, Slone said. And captive-bred pronghorn have taught their wild counterparts to eat alfalfa, which proved useful when the military needed to lure a herd off a part of the nearby training range, he said.

However, how long it will take for the newly released animals to meet up with the wild herd, learn where the best food and water sources are, as well as potentially reestablish the migration route, remains unknown, Sturm said.

“Those types of things the animals will have to figure out,” he said. “It’s anybody’s guess how long it will take.”