



WILDLIFE NOTES

ORYX



Oryx, also called gemsbok, are one of Africa's largest antelope. You do not have to travel that far, however, to find them. Transplanted to New Mexico from 1969 to 1973, they have found White Sands Missile Range to their liking. New Mexico's herd is the only free-ranging herd outside Africa.

Oryx (*Oryx gazella*) were brought to the state to enhance hunting opportunities for exotic game species. Curious observers also may see oryx near U.S. 70 between Alamogordo and Las Cruces. The long, dark horns and the black-and-white face make an oryx difficult to mistake for another big game animal.

Adult oryx may weigh more than 400 pounds. They go through subtle color changes, beginning with a light brown or tan coat up to the age of six or eight months. At adulthood, the coat is grayish. Bull's horns have very fine, compacted ridges at the lower ends; cows also carry the long and slightly curving horns.

Bulls and cows often spar, locking their horns and pushing their opponent. The purpose seems to be a show of dominance. It is common to see oryx with broken horns.

Oryx may calve all year round. There have been no reports of disease at White Sands Missile Range, and natural predation is considered low. The animals seem to prefer a shrubby habitat, with creosote, mesquite, and grass. Much of the water they need comes from vegetation, but they will drink standing water if it is available. The missile range receives only about eight inches of moisture a year.

Population growth is limited primarily by hunting. In 1989 the oryx population was about 600, but special depredation hunts were held south of U.S. 70 and on the Small Missile Range because oryx were wandering too far from their main habitat and were interfering with certain U.S. Army activities. The population now is less than 400 oryx. Last year up to 180 hunting licenses were available.

A wildlife biologist for White Sands Missile Range has noted oryx size and ages at field stations during hunts, and has obtained blood samples from oryx. These will be used for laboratory analyses that may show history of disease in oryx, or a relation between disease potential and the scabies mite that plagues desert bighorn sheep in higher elevations at White Sands Missile Range.

Hunting dates and numbers of licenses are proposed by the Department of Game and Fish, with recommendations from White Sands Missile Range. In the past there have been hunts where sportsmen are essentially on their own, and hunts where every hunter is escorted by a game department officer or an Army MP game warden, when there are sensitive facilities in the hunt area.

One of the best trophies recently bagged was killed by Roxanne Rhea of Roswell in October 1988. Her oryx had 42-inch horns and weighed at least 450 pounds.

In recent years a debate has arisen: Should New Mexico continue to manage non-native wildlife, such as oryx, for public hunting and viewing? So far oryx appear likely to remain on White Sands Missile Range, where they have adapted well, but may surprise the visitor who was not expecting an African safari.