

Feral Hogs: A Growing Problem in Texas

Back in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, it was common for sailing ships from Europe to bring along some domesticated pigs (or hogs if you prefer), both for food along the voyage as well as for food at their destination if, as was common, they had to stay some places for months until trade winds became favorable.

So it is not surprising that when Spanish explorers and settlers came to South Texas during this period, they brought pigs with them as well as horses, cattle, sheep and goats. During this earliest period of Texas settlement, animals were allowed to roam free until people needed meat and hunted them down. Thus began the first feral exotic animals in Texas.

While the other animals were also allowed to roam freely to graze, they could be rounded up or herded and moved and were therefore more “domesticated” and today we don’t have any significant number of these other species as free-ranging feral animals.

Pigs, however are different. They are able to survive under more diverse and adverse conditions, they multiply faster than the other animals listed above, they are omnivores instead of strict herbivores and can, and do, eat almost anything. They are better able to survive injury and disease, and once they revert to the wild, they can be very wary of man. All of this has made the feral pig a very successful invasive animal.

Pigs (*Sus scrofa*) are in the Suidae family and differ from the other even-toed ungulates (cattle, sheep, goats and deer) in that they have crushing cheek teeth, upper incisors, and a simple stomach (thus they are not ruminants). By the way, the javelina or collared peccary (*Pecari tajacu*) is in the Tayassuidae family and is in fact not a pig.

The descendants of the escaped pigs of the early Spanish settlers, plus escaped domestic pigs from the eastern U.S., make up the feral pigs of Texas today. The range of feral pigs has gradually expanded from the south and east to the north and west, so that today they are known in virtually every Texas county. It is estimated that there are 2 million feral pigs in Texas, which is about half of the total population in the U.S.

Most adult boars weigh about 130 pounds, with sows weighing a little less, although larger individuals are seen. They are extremely good at reproduction. While it is an exaggeration, it is often said that feral pigs are born pregnant. They can breed as early as 6 months and produce 2 litters every 12-15 months of 4 to 8 piglets each. They usually travel in groups of a few sows and their piglets of various ages. Boars are solitary much of the time.

Part of the problem with feral pigs is the same kind of problem presented by any feral exotic animal, from fire ants to nutria to axis and fallow deer and blackbuck antelope. They represent a rapid introduction of a non-native animal into a native habitat which introduces new competitors for food and shelter, new predators for native prey, and new consumers for native vegetation. In the case of feral pigs, since all of the large predators have been eliminated or nearly so, there is no natural predator capable of significantly controlling the population.

Feral pigs can be very destructive to many crops as well as fences and other man-made facilities. They can disrupt the soil along riparian areas leading to enhanced erosion. Feral pigs are a serious threat to ground-nesting birds and small animals. They can also consume large quantities of feed landowners put out for livestock and deer. They have poor eyesight, but excellent senses of smell and hearing. They generally shy away from humans, but if cornered they can be dangerous.

Feral pigs also may harbor a number of serious diseases which can be transmitted to livestock, wildlife and humans. A partial list includes anthrax, brucellosis, campylobacter, leptospirosis, plague and salmonellosis, plus a number of viruses as well. So having them around or handling them or their meat can be hazardous.

Since there are no natural enemies, as of now the only limitation on their number appears to be landowners trapping and killing them. Feral pigs can be hunted any time of the year or day, but a hunting license is required.

It should be noted that many people hunt them for the meat, which I hear is quite tasty, but you need to know what you are doing.

Until next time...

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