



Hogs gone wild

Say goodbye to paper license applications

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Research has shown that as much as 60 percent of feral hogs' diet consists of frogs, lizards, snakes, birds and their eggs, and even deer fawns.

Photo: Texas Parks & Wildlife Department



Invasive pigs threaten wildlife, crops

By Karl Moffatt

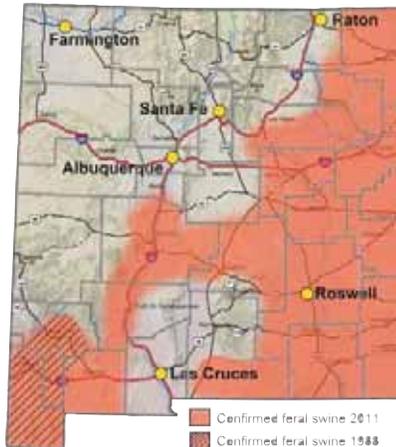
Feral hogs are invading New Mexico and threaten to damage the environment, spread disease and displace wildlife, according to authorities.

"This is a nightmare in the making," says Ron Jones, wildlife specialist for the Wildlife Services Division of the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal, Plant, Health Inspection Service in Tucumcari. "We have a very slim window of opportunity to get a handle on this."

Jones works on the front lines for the lead agency in the battle against the invasion of feral hogs. "And our biggest problem right now is a lack of manpower and money," he says.

The problem in New Mexico has grown from the discovery of feral hogs in the Bootheel region of southwestern New Mexico in 1988 to multiple confirmed sightings in 15 counties. There have been reports of feral hogs in several other counties, including the Rio Grande valley, home of Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

The hogs in the Bootheel are thought to be remnants of a longtime herd of escaped or released domestic pigs, while most of those in eastern New Mexico are thought to have been intentionally released for hunting purposes, Jones says.



Hog hunting has become a popular pursuit in New Mexico due to its lack of a season, no license requirement and unlimited harvest. But while some hunters welcome the feral hogs as another sporting opportunity, others see them as a serious threat.

In an effort to stem the growth of feral hog hunting as a sport and the problems associated with feral hogs, the state Legislature in 2009 passed a law making it illegal to import, hold, release or sell feral hogs or operate a commercial wild hog hunt.

Hogs that have gone wild are classified as feral domestic livestock by the New Mexico Livestock Board. Because they are not protected wildlife, the Department of Game and Fish has no jurisdiction over the species. Although the Department has an agreement with the Livestock Board to help remove feral pigs that are threatening wildlife, livestock or habitat, most of the on-the-ground control is handled by USDA Wildlife Services.

While some of New Mexico's feral hogs are thought to have migrated into the state along the Pecos and Canadian river corridors from Texas, it has been their importation into the state for hunting that has really fueled their growth here, Jones says.

"These folks apparently don't care about the damage

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Photo courtesy USDA

Feral hogs compete with wildlife and livestock for food and water, and can transmit diseases such as pseudorabies and trichinosis.

Hogs gone wild

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they're causing," he says.

Texas is home to an estimated 2.5 million feral hogs that cause an estimated \$52 million dollars in agricultural crop and related damage each year, according to Texas A&M University researchers. Nationally, the feral swine population has grown to an estimated 5 million in 35 states and the hogs are estimated to cause about a \$1 billion in damage each year, according to USDA data. The hogs reproduce rapidly with as many as two litters a year averaging at least six piglets per litter.

Although government agencies encourage hunters and landowners to kill as many feral hogs as possible, the staggering reproduction rates have made hunting inconsequential as a management tool.

Damage and disease

Feral hogs destroy agricultural crops and often kill newborn livestock. Their capacity for carnage is well-documented on government websites, including Texas A&M's, <http://feralhogs.tamu.edu/>.

The hogs also damage wildlife habitat, contaminate water supplies, spread disease and displace wildlife due to competition for natural resources.

"Habitat damage may be the bigger issue for us," says Darrel Weybright, acting Wildlife Management Division chief for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. He characterizes feral pigs as being the new kids on the block, competing with established native wildlife populations for limited resources.

Feral hogs are known to have a strong preference for some of the same food sources used by deer and bears. They relish acorns, and have been known to have depleted any source above ground and then root out underground caches stashed by ground squirrels, pack rats and other animals.

The loss of such an important food base could have a staggering effect on deer and bear populations, which have limited alternative food sources, Weybright says.

"We certainly need to get moving on this and be smart about our approach in dealing with it," he says.

Feral hogs carry numerous diseases, including pseudorabies, an affliction that can be transmitted through casual contact such as the simple touching of noses, says Jones, the federal wildlife specialist. The disease is not believed to be contagious to humans, but can affect cattle, horses, dogs, cats, sheep and goats.

Jones worries about scenarios such as a pack of coyotes, a cougar, bear or other predator killing an infected pig and then contracting and spreading the fatal disease. About 20 feral hogs killed during an eradication operation by wildlife specialists in Quay County in 2009 tested positive for pseudorabies.

Of particular concern to livestock operators is a possible resurgence of other diseases the industry has worked hard to eradicate, such as brucellosis or bovine tuberculosis, which recently has been eliminated in New Mexico, says Dave Fly, veterinarian for the New Mexico Livestock Board.

"We've spent millions of dollars and over 20 years to become free if that," he says. "We can't afford to jeopardize all that work."

Deadly diet

Ravenous, aggressive feral hogs are threatening many species of wildlife, including some that are on threatened and endangered lists.

Research has shown that as much as 60 percent of feral hogs' diet consists of frogs, lizards, snakes, birds and their eggs, and even deer fawns.

In a study at Fort Benning, Ga., the stomach contents of one feral hog revealed 49 spadefoot toads that had been consumed in a single feeding. The study indicated that feral hogs on the U.S. Army post were eating 2.8 million frogs and reptiles a year.

In New Mexico, feral hogs are threatening endangered or threatened species such as the sand dune lizard in the southeast, where the hogs inhabit 100 percent of the lizards' habitat.

Bad weeds, bad water

Farmers, ranchers and conservationists are worried about feral hogs spreading invasive weeds such as the pesky cocklebur, which can be poisonous to livestock. The hogs carry the burs in their hide and deposit the seeds in other areas when they wallow, root or rub against trees.

Jones says he has seen pastures where hogs have rooted for grubs, tubers and earthworms become overgrown with weeds. In some cases, the pastures may never return to their native state. The pigs also eat the seeds of many unwanted rangeland plants such as mesquite trees and cholla cactus. Some of those seeds are then passed whole in the pigs' feces and later sprout to further spread those plants.

"It's a vicious cycle," Jones says.

Feral hogs also can contaminate water sources, including riparian areas, stock tanks and even municipal water supplies. Hogs have tested positive for carrying the potentially fatal strain of E-coli and were implicated in the notorious California spinach food poisoning case of 2006. They also have been found to carry dangerous waterborne pathogens such as campylobacter, salmonella, cryptosporidium and giardia.

One constant the feral hogs must have is water. They need to drink it and they wallow in mud to cool their bodies and fend off insect bites – and they are very industrious in acquiring it.

Tom Dominguez, the Quay County Extension Agent for New Mexico State University's Cooperative Extension Service recalled one rancher's account of feral hogs' pursuit of water: The rancher kept finding one of his stock tanks running over but couldn't determine the cause, so he waited at the tank to see what was causing the big mud pit.

A while later, the rancher saw a herd of feral pigs arrive. Then he watched in amazement as one of the lead pigs climbed into the stock tank and found and held down on the tank float to keep the water flowing to create a wallow pit.

"They're pretty innovative," Dominguez said.

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Ron Jones, wildlife specialist for the Wildlife Services Division of the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal, Plant, Health Inspection Service, tracks a collared "Judas pig" that will lead him to a group of feral hogs.

Photo: Karl Moffatt





Photo: Texas Parks & Wildlife Department

A escaped domestic pig can revert to the wild appearance and behavior of its ancestors in a matter of months, according to some studies.

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The war is on

It's an early December morning and Jones is driving down a muddy ranch road heading for a high spot overlooking a canyon where he hopes to pick up a radio signal from one of his "Judas pigs."

"It's one of the best tools we have," Jones says as he bounces across a pasture and pull to stop on a butte overlooking a wide valley floor. He pulls out what looks like a television antenna and turns on the handset.

"Nothing," he mumbles before explaining how he suspects a hunter had spooked the herd of feral pigs he had been tracking. He was concerned that his "Judas pig" had been killed and the \$200 radio transmitter attached to it had been discarded.

Feral hogs typically run in groups called "sounders" containing 10 to 20 pigs and led by a dominate female. Male "boars" usually roam alone until visiting a sounder for mating.

The "Judas pig" usually is a female that has been caught along with other members of her group in one of Jones' many traps. Her mates are euthanized but the "Judas pig" is released with an attached transmitter to find another group of feral pigs to run with.

Because pigs are highly social animals, the "Judas pig" often leads Jones to the new group. It is a very effective way for Jones and his colleagues to find and eliminate large groups of pigs in a single

outing, often by shooting them from a low-flying airplane.

The shooters spare the "Judas pig," which is fitted with a bright yellow ear tag, so she can lead Jones to another group. Last year, such efforts resulted in the elimination of more than 135 feral hogs, Jones says.

Jones is one of 28 federal wildlife specialists working across the state to handle and reduce conflicts between wildlife and humans. In years past, he spent much of his time dealing with nuisance coyotes, raccoons or skunks, but since his discovery of feral hogs near Tucumcari in 2006, he's been working almost full-time on nothing but feral swine.

"These are highly adaptable, intelligent and resourceful animals," Jones says. "It's almost scary how good they are at what they do and that's way too good for us to tolerate."

Jones and other wildlife specialists provide ranchers, landowners and public lands managers with plans for building cost-effective traps to catch feral hogs. The USDA has developed an eradication plan and has met with stakeholders from around the state to generate understanding about the issue. Funding and manpower are the primary hurdles, Jones says.

"We need to get busy if we want to nip this in the bud," he says.

Karl Moffatt is a longtime New Mexico journalist and avid outdoorsman who publishes regularly at www.outdoorsnewmexico.com.



Feral hogs can do a tremendous amount of damage to agricultural fields and even roadsides while they are rooting for food. The rooting also can spread invasive weeds.

Photo courtesy USDA

Feral hog hunters can pursue game with few restrictions

By Karl Moffatt

Feral hog hunting in New Mexico can be a challenging and rewarding experience that also helps protect wildlife and the environment.

Feral hogs are a non-game, destructive, invasive species and are not subject to regulation and oversight by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. There is no hunting license required for state residents or nonresidents, and there's no season or bag limit, says Rick Winslow, the Department's large carnivore and furbearer biologist.

Those interested in hunting feral hogs should always check with the landowner or land-management agency before hunting to make sure they have permission to trespass and are hunting feral hog, not someone's domestic stock. It's also a good idea to check with the local game warden or area Game and Fish office for guidance.

Hunters also should learn to tell the difference between feral hogs and wild javelinas – a protected game species in New Mexico. Javelinas, or collared peccaries, resemble pigs but are actually a different species. They are smaller than feral hogs and have distinct whitish collars.

Once afield, feral hog hunters should arm themselves with a 30-caliber or larger firearm to safely and humanely dispatch the hogs, which can grow to 400 pounds or more, Winslow says. A well-placed shot just behind the shoulder to target vital organs should do the trick.

Male boars make for good mounts due to their large tusks and ferocious appearance, while the sows and younger pigs make for good eating, producing plenty of chops, hams and tasty ribs, says Winslow, who hunts them himself.

Hunters should exercise precautions to avoid direct exposure to parasites, body fluids and potential disease by wearing rubber gloves and perhaps a neckerchief when field-dressing and butchering a pig. Meat for consumption should be thoroughly cooked to kill potentially deadly diseases such as trichinosis, which most feral hogs carry, Winslow says.

Finding pigs to hunt is easy, Winslow says. "Just look for the nastiest, thickest, hardest place to get to and that's where they'll be," he says.

Feral hogs are smart, wary and adept at avoiding humans but they need water daily. Look for them coming or going from water sources usually around dawn or dusk, Winslow advises.

Hunting is only allowed one-half hour before sunrise to one-half-hour after sunset. Use of artificial light is prohibited except on private land by the landowner or an employee, or with a Department-issued permit on private land.

Feral hogs can be found throughout the entire east side of the state, especially along the Pecos and Canadian river basins. Most are on private land and permission is required to hunt there.

Some public lands in New Mexico harbor feral hogs and hunters can find more information about where, including maps, by visiting U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management websites.

