

Feral hogs a challenging quarry for hunters

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Special Contributor

Editor's note: Many facts were taken from a Feral Hog Appreciation Day event in Adamsville. Staff writer David Lowe also contributed to this report.

The rapid increase of feral hog populations across Texas has both beneficial and negative consequences for hunters and landowners, state wildlife and animal health officials say.

Wild hogs' highly developed senses of smell and hearing, as well as their general intelligence and elusiveness, make the animals an interesting and challenging quarry for many hunters. Feral hogs are not classified as "game animals" and may be hunted all year, with no bag limit.

Landowners or their designated agent may hunt "depredating" hogs on the land the animals have been disrupting. Hunters who pay to hunt on a property owner's land, however, must have a hunting license, game warden Jim Lindeman said. Similarly, a landowner who charges a fee for hog hunting privileges needs a land lease license, Lindeman said.

Consequently, feral hogs can provide hunting income for many landowners. On the other hand, hogs destroy many crops -- particularly corn, wheat, peanuts and sweet potatoes -- tear fences and can eat young sheep, goats and deer.

Officials have estimated that wild hogs cause \$52 million in agricultural damage each year in the United States. Even so, hogs can enhance conditions for some game animals, said Dr. Dale Rollins, a Texas Agrilife Extension wildlife specialist who has conducted public information meetings statewide about feral hogs.

"An indirect benefit of having wild hogs is that although their rooting may destroy some grass, the disturbed area will then grow more forbs, which provides food for game birds, such as quail, and for deer," Rollins said.

The exact number of wild hogs in Texas is not known, Rollins said, although the Texas hog population has been estimated at about 2 million -- nearly half the estimated United States total.

Feral hogs are found in 225 of the 254 counties in Texas. Only the northern Panhandle and the extreme western edge of the Trans-Pecos region in El Paso County do not have the hogs.

The rapid spread of hogs across Texas has occurred primarily because the animals sometimes are trapped and released in other areas for hunting, Rollins said.

Sows, gilts and boars may be moved directly to slaughter or to an approved holding facility, then to slaughter. Boars and barrows also may be moved to hunting preserves that are fenced adequately to prevent swine from escaping. Before being released, the animals must have individual identification approved by the Texas Animal Health Commission, TAHC representative Dr. David Finch said.

"Feral sows and gilts are not to be moved to hunting preserves," Finch said. "We already have too many wild hogs



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Prolific breeders, feral hogs have increased in population in virtually all Texas counties. The wild hogs provide hunting opportunities, but they also can destroy crops and disrupt wildlife.

without releasing more breeding animals."

A lack of natural predators and wild hogs' high reproductive rate also have allowed the number of animals in Texas to explode, Rollins said. Once a sow reaches the breeding age of seven or eight months, the specialist said, it can produce as many as two litters of four to six pigs every year. Under favorable conditions, Rollins said, one sow can be responsible for as many as 1,000 feral swine in a five-year period.

The increase in game feeders across the state also has fueled hog population growth, Rollins said. Most ranches have several automatic feeders that dispense corn or protein feed for wildlife such as deer. These feeders provide an easy source of food for feral hogs, allowing sows to produce more piglets.

Wild hogs do not eat cottonseed, which West Texas ranchers often feed cattle and deer, Rollins said. Because hogs pay no attention to cottonseed, it makes a good deer feed alternative to corn, he said.

Diseases from wild hogs generally do not pose a significant threat to humans, Finch said. "However, some diseases can be transmitted to livestock and wildlife.

"It is important to keep all livestock vaccinated, especially where large feral hog populations are concentrated," he said.

"Tests on feral hogs indicate that about 20 percent of these animals carry pseudorabies, a flu-like disease. About 10

percent have swine brucellosis."

Other diseases in wild hogs include bubonic plague, tularemia, hog cholera, foot and mouth disease, and anthrax. Several types of internal and external parasites are found in or on the animals.

Pseudorabies poses no threat to humans, but it may be fatal to domestic livestock and pets.

To protect themselves from diseases, Finch said hunters should wear long plastic gloves covered with latex gloves when dressing feral hogs. After the animal is dressed, the gloves and entrails should be burned or buried. When finished, the hunter should wash his hands thoroughly with soap and water, and knives used to dress the pig also should be cleaned and sterilized.

As long as dressed and prepared properly, feral hog meat is safe to eat and extremely tasty, Finch said. Meat quality depends, however, on the age and condition of the animal. Meat from older boars may be tough and rank-tasting.

As with all pork, the meat should be cooked to an internal temperature of at least 180 degrees. The slower the meat is cooked, the more tender it becomes.

Tasting hog meat or leasing property to swine hunters is not as palatable to all landowners as hog eradication, however.

Three primary methods are used to control hog populations: hunting, trapping and aerial gunning.

Although hog numbers cannot be significantly reduced strictly from hunting,

trapping may be more effective. Live trapping of feral hogs enables an individual to trap the animals, fatten them up and slaughter or sell them.

The most common trap design is a 4x8-foot heavy-duty cage with a spring door or root door. These cages will fit in the back of a pickup bed to enable the hogs to be transported without removing them from the cage.

Rollins said to trap a larger number of animals, landowners should construct a large pen made with cattle panels, with a metal root door. "Bait the area with soured corn for several days with the door open until the pigs become accustomed to the pen. Then set the door, and you may catch a dozen or more hogs at one time."

Pat Flanagan, Texas Wildlife Service trapper, said snares also could be used effectively when placed under fences in travelways that surround the active area. He added that the snare should not be tied to the fence unless the property owner wants the hog to tear up a good portion of it. The snare should be tied to a heavy object that the pig can drag.

Finch said there are no birth controls, toxicants or repellents registered for the control of feral hogs, however research is being conducted to determine if certain toxicants may be effective in controlling the animals.

With hog populations unlikely to decline soon, hunters should have many opportunities to pursue wild swine both in Lampasas County and elsewhere in Texas.