



You Ain't From Around Here! Exotic Invasive of the Quarter: Wild Hogs (*Sus scrofa*)

By: Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech

Let me make this clear upfront, this article has nothing whatsoever to do with the film *Wild Hogs* starring Tim Allen, John Travolta, Martin Lawrence and William H. Macy. I apologize if you thought otherwise. But I ask that you keep reading, for I suspect you may find the information below far more interesting and entertaining than the above-mentioned film. Personally, I am hog-wild to be writing about the intelligent, athletic (yes, that's right) and highly-adaptable wild hog. I have so much information to share about the number one invasive species in the US, that this article will be broken into two parts. Part 1 will cover wild hog history, damage, and biology. Part 2 (in the Spring 2013 issue) will cover range, control recommendations and what Virginia is doing to keep wild hogs under control.



Just one fence away from going wild. Photo by: Scott Bauer, USDA Agricultural Research Service.

So what is a wild hog? Is it the same as a feral hog or a wild boar? What is the difference between a wild hog and a domesticated pig? A wild hog is any pig outside the property of its owner which cannot be claimed by its owner. Really, any pig not in a pen. So, if Wilbur had escaped the Zuckerman's barn, he would have become a wild hog. But, not all wild hogs are the same. Here the story gets a bit complicated.

All animals referred to as hogs/pigs/swine/boars are descendants of the Eurasian wild boar (*Sus scrofa*). Eurasian wild boar were first brought to the US in the 1890's as a big game species (they are smart, so they are fun to hunt....see Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game"). All of these initial introductions were into fenced shooting preserves. Many of these were followed by secondary introductions into other locations. A number of these later releases were made into unfenced areas. In other instances, the wild boar were able to break out of the fenced enclosures where they were being maintained (hence the famous saying: you can't fence a pig).

In Europe, the Eurasian wild boar was domesticated and raised as livestock, or domesticated swine. Domesticated swine were brought to the US by early European settlers and raised as free-range livestock. Many of them disappeared into the woods and became feral hogs.

Both Eurasian wild boar and feral hogs are still here today. In addition, wild boar and feral hogs can interbreed, resulting in populations of hybrids. Distinguishing among the three types can be very challenging, and in terms of the damage they cause and methods of control, it doesn't matter which type they are. So the collective, wild hogs, is the most appropriate term to use when collectively referring to hogs/pigs/swine/boar not in captivity. And none of these should be confused with the javelina or collared peccary (*Tayassu tajacu*), a native pig-like animal found in the southwestern US.

Wild hogs can now be found in 47 states, 36 of which have established populations (the animals have been there at least 2 years and are reproducing). Wyoming, Delaware and Rhode Island are

the only states claiming to not have wild hog populations. The wild hog population in the US is estimated to be between 3-8 million individuals. The population has exploded since 1990 (when the population was estimated at 500,000). This population explosion is known as the pig bomb.

What caused the pig bomb? Well, like so many invasive species, wild hogs are adaptable to a wide variety of habitats. And they are very good at reproducing. In fact, there is no known animal this size or larger that is better at reproducing. Sows (the females) can start having litters when they are as young as 3 months; litters are large, averaging 6 piglets, but up to 12. They breed year-round and can have up to 2 litters a year. Additionally, hunting wild hogs has become very popular in the US, and Eurasian wild boar are once again being brought into the country for sport (the legality of this practice varies by state).



Several sounders of wild hogs. Note the variation in coat coloration. Photo by: Billy Higginbotham, Texas AgriLife Extension Service.

Wild hogs are easy to identify. If you see a pig in the woods, it could be a wild hog. In the wild, males weigh up to up to 200 pounds; sows are somewhat smaller, weighing in at 175 pounds.

Full-grown adults are about 36" at shoulder height and 5-6' long. There are numerous tales of Hogzillas and Sons of Hogzillas, weighing in at over 600 pounds. But hogs these sizes are most likely recently-escaped domesticated swine. These swine will lose their domesticated characteristics within a few generations.

Hog coloration is extremely variable. Their coats can be black, white, red-brown, or spotted. Some have belts, some do not. Some have white faces, some do not. There is controversy in the literature over whether or not coloration can be used to identify the type of wild hog (Eurasian wild boar, feral hogs or hybrid). But again, this isn't terribly important.

Wild hogs have cloven hooves, like deer, sheep and goats. A good defining track characteristic is the rounded or blunt toes of hogs, as opposed to the more pointed toes of a deer. Also, dewclaws are common in wild hog tracks.

Sows are social animals and travel with their piglets (in groups called sounders) and sometimes join up with other sounders. The males are solitary except when they are breeding. Extremely large groups of wild hogs (100+) are sometimes found near large food and water sources, but these groups don't remain intact for long.

The home range of a wild hog averages 4 square miles, but can be as large as 50 square miles, depending on the resources available. Wild hogs are creatures of habit, so typically many paths are found in these areas. The movement of wild hogs is described as drifting, wandering, or aimless. Unless they are properly motivated. When they are, they can run up to 30 miles per hour, jump 3 foot fences, swim up to 2 miles, turn sharp corners while running, ascend very steep inclines, and jump/climb out of 5-6' tall corrals. In fact, the only thing wild hogs can't do (at least not yet) is fly. I told you they were athletic.

The next time someone calls me a hog, I'm going to thank them!

Wild hogs have an amazing sense of smell. They can smell things up to 7 miles away. Their eyesight is good too, and they have been known to respond to a visual threat up to a mile away.

Wild hogs are not finicky eaters. They will eat anything that has calories and will fit in their mouth (kind of like me when I get home from work in the evenings). Most of their diet consists of plants (88%), then animals (10%); their remaining diet consists of fungi, algae, and miscellaneous items such as rocks, sticks, soil and garbage.

So what's the big deal? As a forester, I've known for a long time that wild hogs are trouble. Wild hogs love to dig up and eat the roots of freshly-planted tree seedlings. They will also root up lawns. In addition, they can cause severe habitat damage, including stream sedimentation. Sedimentation decreases spawning habitat for some fish species, reduces mussel production and interferes with many aquatic invertebrates' lifecycles. Although the majority of their diet consists of vegetation, they will also eat turkey, quail, and grouse eggs, and small animals such as salamanders, frogs, snakes, and even fawns. And, these aggressive critters compete with our native wildlife for food.

Wild hogs also carry a number of diseases which can affect humans, livestock, wildlife and house pets. Two common diseases are swine brucellosis and pseudorabies. Swine brucellosis is the most well-known, as hunters coming into contact with blood, fluid or tissue during the field dressing or butchering process can become infected. Pseudorabies does not affect humans, but can be transmitted to domesticated swine, weakening them and causing reproductive problems. It can also be transmitted to other farm animals, such as cattle, sheep, and goats, wild mammals such as foxes, raccoons and skunks, and cats and dogs. For these species, the disease can be fatal. There are also stories about wild hogs attacking humans, but in reality, these are rare and typically not fatal. But wild hogs have been known to attack dogs.



Wild hog damage to a lawn. Photo by: Billy Higginbotham, Texas AgriLife Extension Service.

While estimates of economic losses from wild hogs vary greatly, in Texas, which has an extremely high wild hog population, annual losses from damage are estimated at \$50 million, and an additional \$7 million is spent on control efforts.

To find out how wild hogs are affecting Virginia landowners and what steps are being taken to stop them, stay tuned for the Spring 2013 edition of the newsletter. If you can't stand the suspense, there is a wealth of information available at:

- <http://feralhogs.tamu.edu/>
- <http://e-answers.adec.edu> (search for wild hogs)
- http://www.extension.org/feral_hogs (you will need to register to access this site)
- <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0486946/>
- And you can like Feral Hogs on Facebook

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