

September 1, 2003

Feral Hogs: The Good, The Bad or The Ugly?

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VERTON -- The early Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto didn't realize the impact feral hogs would have on Texas when he dropped off the first few way back in 1539. Things haven't been quite the same since, according to Dr. Billy Higginbotham, Texas Cooperative Extension wildlife specialist here.

“When it comes to feral hogs, one thing's for sure, there's no middle ground - Texans' either love 'em or hate 'em,” said Higginbotham.

Hog numbers today range between 1 and 2 million in the Lone Star State alone. That figure gives Texas the dubious honor of being America's feral hog capital, easily surpassing any of the 30 states where wild hogs roam.

Higginbotham said there are 23 recognized feral hog subspecies worldwide. In Texas, feral hogs are descendants of domesticated hogs gone wild, Eurasian wild boars, or a cross between the two.

“Feral hogs now inhabit every county in the state, with the exceptions of the extreme western Trans-Pecos and western Panhandle,” said Higginbotham. “It's safe to say there are just two kinds of landowners - those with feral hogs and those who are about to have them!

“The Texas feral hog invasion has occurred due to range expansion of this prolific critter and indiscriminate stockings. Hog releases in one area quickly result in moves to adjoining properties. The resultant damage usually ends in hard feelings between neighbors. It is illegal to catch and re-release feral swine onto another property unless they test negative for swine brucellosis and pseudorabies.

“Many landowners hate the thought of feral hogs on their properties because of crop and ranch facility damage, livestock depredation, disease transmission and competition for food with livestock and wildlife.”

On the flip-side, Higginbotham said, many hunters see feral hogs as an extremely popular game species.

A Texas Cooperative Extension survey indicated hog hunters paid in a range of \$25-\$1000 for a hog hunt with the average price paid being \$169. “This represents a real opportunity for those landowners already locked in a battle to reduce hog populations,” said Higginbotham.

“Along with the hunting dollar, commercial hunters using dogs and trappers often sell live hogs to buyers across the state who process the animals for the restaurant trade. Prices are over 50 cents per pound for large hogs in some parts of Texas.”

Hunting activity is concentrated in the state’s most heavily hog-populated areas, according to Higginbotham. These include the Pineywoods, northern Post Oak Savannah, Hill Country, South Texas and the Rolling Plains. Hog hunting is especially popular among bow hunters and black powder enthusiasts, although most are still taken with deer rifles of 25 caliber or larger.

Feral hogs do reach weights in excess of 300 pounds, but more commonly, weights average 100-150 pounds.

The specialist said a bit of knowledge about the biology and habits of feral hogs can improve hunting success. “Hogs are extremely intelligent animals with a keen sense of smell,” he said. “Whenever possible, hunt into the wind to avoid detection. Many deer hunters are amazed at just how hard they can be to outwit.

“Feral boars are solitary animals. They generally don't associate with other hogs except during breeding seasons. The females and their offspring usually travel together in groups called ‘sounders’.

“Hogs usually prefer moist areas in extremely dense cover during daylight hours. They

are usually nocturnal during summer's heat. During the winter though, hogs may become more active during the daytime as they search for food. Hunting pressure can result in a hog population that is rarely seen during daylight hours, regardless of the season.

“Hunters can stack the odds in their favor by learning to identify hog sign. Fresh wallows in wet areas say hogs are in the area.

“Hog rubs that leave mud against power lines, fence posts or trees are another tip-off that hogs are nearby. Like white-tails, hogs are creatures of habit. Crossings under fences can be located by looking for the coarse hog-hair left on fence wires.”

Higginbotham said the increasing popularity of using infrared-triggered cameras near feeders or on game trails also provides proof-positive evidence of recent hog activity.

He said most hogs are hunted from a stand placed near a corn feeder. Stalking makes for an exciting hunt as well, but both techniques require the hunter to stay downwind or they will be detected before the hogs are ever seen.

Hogs should be field-dressed with the same techniques used for white-tailed deer. Rubber gloves should be worn during processing for health reasons.

“Hog hunting fun doesn't end with the kill,” said Higginbotham. “Prepared properly, feral hog makes excellent table fare. In fact, wild pig cooking contests have become regular and popular events in more than a few Texas communities.

“If you have never challenged your hunting skills by pursuing the feral hog, make plans for a hunt in the near future. Hog-hunting season is always open and hog hunters are almost always welcomed by landowners overrun by this controversial ‘new’ Texan.”