

Feral Hogs: Trouble on the Horizon

by Aaron Proctor

You can call them wild hogs, wild boars, razorbacks, or even Russian boars. Most wildlife biologists refer to them collectively as feral hogs or feral pigs. Whatever you call them, they pose disastrous threats to wildlife habitat wherever they exist and are nothing but bad news. But what exactly is a feral hog? Merriam-Webster defines the word *feral* as “not domesticated or cultivated” and “having escaped from domestication and become wild.” Simply put, it’s a hog that is surviving on its own in the wild without ownership. Feral hogs do not have to possess thick and coarse black hair or have long tusks. They are known to have different shades and combinations of black, brown, red, and blonde hair. A feral hog can simply be a hog that has escaped a farm operation or has been released to the wild; free from the influence of any humans, buildings, or fences.

Currently, feral hogs are known to exist in at least 40 states across the country. There are an estimated 4 to 6 million nationwide, with an estimated 2.5 million in Texas alone. We can thank early explorer Hernando DeSoto for first introducing swine in the southeastern

U.S. in the 1500s in present-day Florida. Like many other domesticated livestock animals, hogs seemed an easy choice to bring to a new world as a food source. But there are some crucial differences between swine and other livestock animals. Hogs have the ability to thrive in a wild state, can exist in a variety of climates, and possess a very high reproductive potential. They also disturb the ground as they forage and turn up the earth (called “rooting”). They have been described as “four-legged ecological disasters.” That’s about as bad as it gets among the wildlife community.

A pair of mature swine can produce 3 litters of up to 4–8 piglets about every 14 months. Once piglets reach the juvenile size-class, approximately 40 pounds at about 6 months of age, there really aren’t any natural predators on our landscape that can control their numbers. Feral hogs are the biological equivalent of a military battle tank. Their coarse hair, thick skin, and cartilaginous plates on their shoulder blades evolved for protection from fighting with each other. Thousands of years of domestication are not enough to suppress these hidden genes. A group of pink and portly barnyard hogs left out in the wild can revert

back to this wild-looking state in only a few generations. They are also a filthy species. Feral hogs are known to carry at least 45 different diseases and parasites that can be infectious or harmful to livestock, pets, native wildlife, and humans.

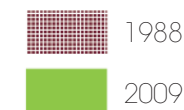
In Virginia, the only long-term or historical population of feral hogs exists in the extreme southeastern Virginia Beach area, in Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, and in False Cape State Park. Estimated to fluctuate between 200 and 500 individuals, this population is the result of subsistence farmers abandoning their homesteads in the 1920s–1930s and leaving their livestock behind. The fact that a breeding population of hogs has existed in this rather harsh and sandy environment for nearly 100 years is a testament to their heartiness and ability to survive in a multitude of habitats. Throughout the years, this population has been hunted through controlled programs and other collection efforts and is greatly undesired on both the federal and state lands they occupy. Yet they still exist, proving that hunting alone does not control population numbers.

A look at range maps from 1988 and 2009 (pg. 21) paints a grim picture. Feral hogs are spreading like wildfire across the country, and they don’t pop up in new areas without help. Pigs are not migratory animals. More and more suspect populations of feral hogs are appearing across the commonwealth, where wildlife biologists for both the Department (DGIF) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services speculate that intentional releases are occurring by those who wish to get feral hogs established for hunting purposes.

Decades of wild hog hunting in many states, often without bag limits under a “nuisance species” declaration, has done nothing to stop their spread. In fact, it is most likely making it worse. The popularization of hog hunting is growing, so it follows that the desire by some to transport and stock feral swine

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Feral Hog Locations in the US



Map data courtesy of:
Southeastern Cooperative
Wildlife Disease Study –
University of Georgia

June 2012 Feral Hog (*Ses scrofa*) Locations in Virginia



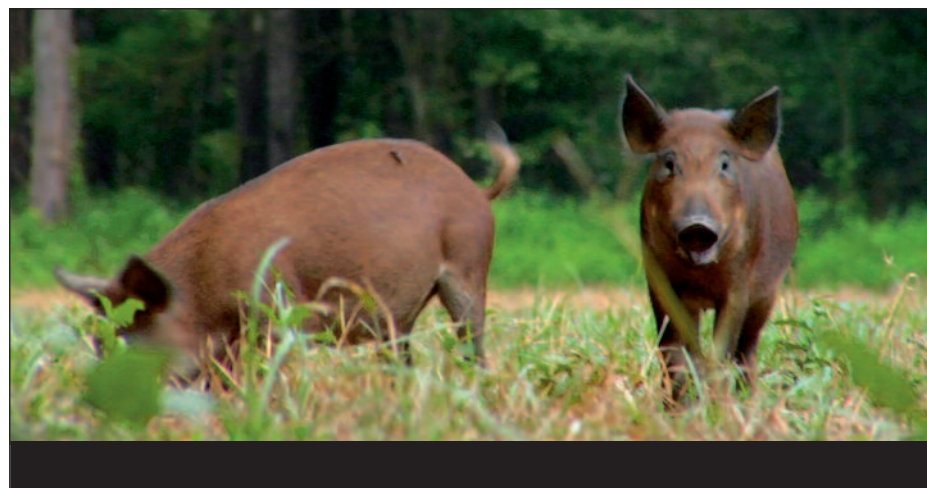
USDA APHIS WS VA & DGIF

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in new places is growing as well. But feral hogs are not “fun and games.” What may seem like an innocent sport where one can harvest hogs as a nuisance species actually poses a tremendous threat to our native wildlife and habitat across the commonwealth.

Last year the Department formed a feral hog committee along with partner agencies and is beginning to focus on the feral hog problem in Virginia. We hope that landowners, hunters, and wildlife enthusiasts alike will all band together to understand and support the idea that there’s no place for these hogs in the wild. If you see or suspect that feral hogs are on your property, please notify your nearest DGIF office. For more information on feral swine and control methods, please visit the following web pages: www.extension.org/feral_hogs and <http://wildpiginfo.msstate.edu/index.html>.

Aaron Proctor serves as the Department’s district biologist in the southeastern region of the state.



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The spread of feral hogs across the U.S. is nothing but bad news.



Jon Simmons

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Among other concerns, feral hogs cause tremendous damage to the landscape.