

"Piney Woods Rooters" have

Gone Hog Wild in Florida

by Justin Sapp

Are the problems caused by Florida's half-million hogs too much for crafty pursuit and a loaded gun?

Depending on who you talk to, you might think there is an uneasy and growing divide over the value of the wild hog.

Many view the critter as a thrilling hunt, excellent table fare and a boost to local economies. Others view them as a major nuisance that cause damage to crops, pastures, farm ponds, watering holes and even domestic stock and wildlife.

For those who are undecided, there

is really no need to hop off the fence and pick a side because, well, both sides are correct. Regardless of your attitude toward the wild hog, there are plenty of good reasons to familiarize yourself with the good and the bad of this resident of Florida's woods and rural communities.

Pigs arrived in our country with some of the earliest settlers, and, like us, they did not have much trouble finding suitable places to call home. Today, there are about 3 million hogs running wild through 35 states as far north as Canada. But these hogs feel especially at home in Florida.

"The only state with more wild hogs than Florida is Texas," said Bill Giuliano, an assistant professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

These wild hogs include free-ranging swine that come from domesticated stock, Eurasian wild boar and the interbreeding hybrids of the two. In Florida, they are all considered the same species. Although pigs are not native to the Americas, it has obviously not been a problem for an animal that is both highly intelligent and capable of adapting to a wide variety of environments.

In fact, the wild pig is the most productive large wild mammal in North America. With a high-quality diet, hogs can breed before six months of age. Sows can produce two litters per year and young may be born at any time of the year. Given adequate nutrition, a wild pig population can double in just four months.

Giuliano explains that, while acorns are their favorite food, they will eat just about anything, including dead animals, and it seems like they are always looking for opportunities. When natural foods are scarce, hogs will forage on just about



THIS TOOTHY PORKER was arrowed by 16-year-old Grant Strauss while hunting at the Fisheating Creek Hunting Camp-Gopher Gully Lease in Palmdale, Florida. Grant used his PSE Firestorm Lite Bow with Hypershock heads.

any available agricultural crop or livestock feed. They also feed on tree seeds, causing significant damage to forests and groves, particularly in the Southeast, where wild hogs are most abundant. In fact, hogs are a serious problem for land managers seeking to establish long-leaf pine forests in the state. That leads us right into the long list of problems caused by these opportunistic animals.

Given their preference for hard mast, particularly acorns, wild hogs compete directly with many popular game animals, including deer and turkey. In areas where hog populations are highest—like south Florida around Lake Okeechobee and areas of northwest Florida—this competition can limit the productivity of deer and turkey, especially during dry years with few acorns and other mast. Also, any hunter who has had their supplemental food plots for deer and turkey completely destroyed by wild hogs knows that this competition can be fierce. Turkey hunters can't even think about planting chufa in areas where there are a lot of hogs.

Wild hogs also feed on the nests of reptiles and ground-nesting birds like bobwhite quail and have even been known to consume the young of domestic livestock, poultry, and other young animals like deer fawns.

But let us not forget the tell-tale sign of hog activity: rooting. Those areas where it appears as if the town drunk got inspired with a powerful tiller are more than an unsightly scar on the lo-

cal landscape: As pigs dig for foods below the surface, soil becomes unstable which can lead to erosion and allow exotic plants to get established. According to the Nuria Sancho, a biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in Taylor County, wild hog

rooting is responsible for the establishment of torpedo grass, an invasive plant that threatens native forage, in certain wildlife management areas in Florida's Big Bend. Rooting also leads to erosion and a decline in water quality.

Another area of concern is the diseases carried by wild hogs. Wild hogs in Florida are known to have 45 different parasitic and infectious diseases. They can carry cholera, salmonella, brucellosis, trichinosis, and many other pathogens that can affect livestock, wildlife, and even people.

Finally, hogs can be dangerous. While they much prefer to run away when encountered, if they are injured or cornered, then they can cause some serious injury. If you have any doubts about those tusks, just take a look at the scars on any experienced dog used for hog hunting.

While we've established that wild hogs can degrade habitat, compete with deer and turkey for food, damage crops, and present a major health risk, it is the hunt—and the resulting sausage or pulled-pork sandwich—that makes it so hard to put this troublesome animal on the list of public enemies.

George Tanner, a colleague of Giuliano and professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, comes to the rescue to tell us just what we want to hear. "Hunting is an important control method for wild hogs because it provides recreational opportunities." In fact, Tanner takes great joy in helping control the population—and fill his freezer in the process—while participating in these "recreational opportunities" in the local woods around Fanning Springs.

Tanner believes that trapping—especially cage trapping because it allows multiple hogs to be caught at one time—is more effective at reducing the number of hogs than hunting alone. "There is even some preliminary research that shows that litter size may increase as a result of increased hunting pressure."

Regardless, Tanner still believes that we should harvest more pigs. Even the male boars that most of us overlook in favor of the fat sow should be given consideration by the business end of a gun barrel.

As Tanner notes, "I have not had any problems with harvesting young boar and the quality of the table fare has been fine." Tanner believes the way in

which an animal is harvested has a lot to do with the quality of the meat. "It's the same with deer, if a pig is chased, the adrenaline is running..." and table quality of the meat tends to decline. "I even killed a great big old boar in Gainesville because I wanted to test it. Other than being a little tough, I didn't have any trouble at all with the odor."

I guess it's time to go hunting.

Learn more about wild hogs including important safety information on the Taylor County Extension Web site at <http://taylor.ifas.ufl.edu>

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THIS BIG PIG WAS TAKEN BY DAVID J. SCHMITT of Northport, Florida while hunting at Bear Bridge Ranch in Eustis. The hog weighed 158 pounds.