

Outdoors

Wild Boars: Deer-lease bonus or dangerous nuisance?

A note in a recent magazine stated that the feral hog has become the second-most popular big-game animal in California. It struck me that he may be approaching that status in Texas, too ... if not also in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia and several other Appalachian states.

The wild boar (the ancestor of all feral swine) is, of course, a prized game species throughout Europe.

The first hogs in Texas are said to have escaped from the 1540 AD expedition of the Spanish conquistador Coronado. This gave them a 500-year head start on pigs of the same species that have gone wild more recently. They didn't really need it; a hog completely reverts to the wild state about the time he makes it 20 yards from his pen.

All feral swine are of the same species as European boars, and except for differences in coloring, hair and body proportions, are identical in every respect, including a high IQ and hot tempers.

There have been numerous infusions, for sporting purposes, of pure-blooded wild boar stock in various parts of the United States, but interbreeding with domestics running loose occurs so readily that genetically pure free-ranging Europeans probably don't exist.

Among these importations have been releases of wild-caught European animals in California, New Hampshire, Georgia, Florida, perhaps Arkansas, and in at least two locations in Texas, one of which was right here in our Hill Country. Many feral swine in Kerr County still show their European ancestry quite plainly.

Texas ranchers tend to look upon hog populations with mixed feelings. Deer hunters often regard them as an extra attraction on their leases. But almost all landowners also view hogs as vermin. They destroy roads, fences, tank dams, crops, livestock and wildlife, and under rare circumstances even threaten humans.

Furthermore, they're almost impossible to exterminate. Not only are pigs wary and remarkably bright (rated by scientists as smart as a dog), but sows breed young and deliver as many as two



Photo by John Wootters

The author collected this large boar on his Webb County ranch using the Thompson/Center Contender single-shot pistol with a custom SSK Industries barrel chambered to the wildcat .375 JDJ cartridge. This round is sometimes described as "accurate enough for prairie dogs; powerful enough for elephants." The boar weighed an estimated 350 pounds and carried six-inch ivory sabers for tusks.

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litters of pigs annually. Trying to stem this porcine tsunami by shooting is a fool's errand. Hunting with hounds is more successful, but falls far short of elimination.

Catching hogs wholesale in large trap pens offers more promise, but involves much work and time. Most ranchers eventually give up and settle for shooting as many as they can and hoping that their deer hunters will keep the swine down to a dull oink.

Wild porkers never get fat, and opinions vary as to their food value. Speaking only for myself, I find that young ones of either sex weighing not more than 80 pounds are good fare, mature females fair, and old males not worth thinking about, even for a pork lover.

Big mature boars can be belligerent toward humans who crowd them, especially if wounded. I've had sows with

piglets threaten me, but the threat seemed to be mostly bluff; still, I'd prefer not to call that bluff unless I was very well armed. Some folks pooh-pooh the danger from wild hogs, but that's whistling in the dark; they're fast and quick, they do sometimes become aggressive, and they carry lethal weapons in the form of those double-edged tusks.

They're also hard to kill. Unless a side brain shot is presented, I prefer to attack wild hogs with cartridges packing a bit more power than standard deer rifles. The .444 Marlin, .375 Winchester, .45-70, and similar rounds are ideal. Shots at wild hogs have a way of occurring in bad light and/or thick brush.

Trophy boars wear tough, inch-thick hide "shields" on shoulders and neck, and their bones are like concrete. They

can attain weights of 400 pounds or more and call for bullets that penetrate, above all. Heavy-for-caliber, premium slugs are proper medicine for hogs.

Wild swine are definitely not quarry for the dilettante, the faint-hearted, or the raw novice, but they certainly do add an extra bit of excitement to deer hunting in many parts of rural Texas.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.