

Outdoors



Photo by John Wootters

Wootters, right, and old friend Dr. Don Ruthven compare stories after a successful South Texas hog hunt. Both animals are mature boars.

Texas' No. 2 big-game animal

There's no doubt that the second-ranked big game animal in Texas is the wild hog ... sometimes glamorized as "wild boar" or "Russian boar."

The fact is that no free-ranging pure-blooded European swine exist anywhere in the U.S., although some populations of feral hogs in Texas occasionally show signs of such interbreeding. West Kerr County happens to be one such area.

Even so, Texas wild hogs have a long and proud history. The first ones are said to have escaped from the expedition of the Spanish conquistador Coronado 500 years ago.

Escaped hogs naturalize in the feral state almost instantly, becoming wilder than deer overnight. They are extremely prolific, with young sows beginning to breed very early and delivering two litters a year in favorable conditions.

For some reason, wild sows seem to have somewhat smaller litters than the same bloodlines in captivity, averaging perhaps 4 to 5 instead of the 10 or 12 pigs sometimes claimed. They're good mothers, though, and tend to raise a high percentage of their young successfully. Threaten the piglets of a wild mama hog and you'll find out how successfully!

These are admirable game animals. They are largely nocturnal, very wary, and extremely intelligent. Their senses of hearing and scent are at least equal to any whitetail's, and their vision is not, in my experience, nearly as poor as sometimes claimed.

I've had hogs notice me at 100 yards or more, and have more than once been puzzled by their taking alarm at my

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approach when I thought they could not possibly have seen, heard or smelled me. In fact, I've actually wondered if hogs might possess some mysterious sort of sixth sense, or maybe ESP.

Being classified as non-game animals, there are no closed seasons or bag limits on wild hogs, and the meat from suitable specimens is good the year around. "Suitable specimens," in my judgment, comprise males under about 80 pounds and all females.

Most landowners regard hogs as vermin of the worst sort and usually welcome courteous and responsible hog hunters at any time. The swine are extremely destructive residents on any rural property, damaging crops, roads, dams and fences. The old boars are quite capable of killing and eating lambs, kids and fawns.

These old males can become quite aggressive toward humans, too, and are not to be taken lightly. They're big (up to 300 pounds or more) and notoriously tough to kill. Given the choice, I'd pick a bit more gun than the average deer rifle for a mature boar, especially if hunting afoot, with or without dogs. Some of my favorite rifle calibers for such sport are the .375 Winchester, .444 and .450 Marlin, and .45-70, in fast-handling lever-action rifles.

Obviously I like large calibers and heavy bullets for hogs.

Experienced hog dogs, such as Catahoulas or black-mouth curs, are an exciting way to hunt hogs and I know several local hunters who use them with fine results. More hogs by far, however, are taken over bait from blinds. The hog's one weakness is his notorious appetite, and a bait hole with soured corn and molasses is irresistible. Even so, the hogs are most likely to appear just at dusk, making for hurried shots in bad light.

Wild hogs never seem to walk anywhere. At least during daylight hours the standard gait is a high trot, even when not spooked. And don't wait for him to stop; he won't — unless he runs across something to eat or a girl pig. You have to take the shot when you can.

The presence of wild hogs on a deer lease is widely regarded as a bonus feature, and I've heard of lessors actually limiting their deer hunters to not more than four hogs per gun. When I owned a South Texas ranch, I put it a little differently: If you let a wild hog get away alive, you can't come back!

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson'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 Peterson's "Hunting."