

WETLAND WILD This Little Piggy



When visitors return to the center from their wetland walk, they often ask: “Were those *pigs* we saw?” *By Patricia Nichols; feral pig photos by Tom Fleming*

Yes, *Sus scrota*—nonnative feral pigs (also known as hogs, razorbacks, pineywoods rooters, woods hogs, wild boars and names we can’t use here). They’ve become the most destructive invasive species in the U.S. (and maybe the planet). As many as 9 million call 42 states home. Half of them may be in Texas. These rootin’ (literally)-tootin’ pigs gone wild have adapted to every region of the state, including our wetland.

Where did they come from? Christopher Columbus and other Spanish explorers brought domestic pigs with them as a sustainable, low-maintenance source of food. The pigs were often allowed to roam or were abandoned by the explorers and later by Native Americans and European settlers. Some became [feral, which is a domestic animal gone wild](#). Then [Eurasian wild boars](#) were thrown into the genetic mix when they were imported and released in the U.S. for recreational hunting in the early 1900s. The feral pigs in the U.S. today are Eurasian boars, feral domestic pigs or hybrids of the two.

Why are they so prolific? These highly intelligent animals reproduce fast, eat almost anything, adapt to a wide range of ecosystems and lack natural predators in many places where they live. Plus, there is evidence that humans are adding to the problem by transporting feral pigs to new areas for hunting.


What is their reproduction rate? High—the highest of any ungulate, or hoofed mammal. Under

favorable conditions, females can begin breeding as young as 6 months, and mature sows may have 10-13 piglets per litter every 12-15 months, although 5 to 6 per litter is more common. With ideal circumstances, a local population can triple in a year.

What’s their preferred habitat? While they’ve adapted to a wide range of ecosystems, they prefer moist bottomland and riparian areas like our wetland. They like dense vegetation for protection from prey and weather.

Who preys on them? Not much besides humans, who furiously kill them. Natural predation from animals like coyotes, bobcats, golden eagles, black bears, alligators and mountain lions plays a minor role in feral pig mortality. The pigs typically live about 5 years. Mortality is high during juveniles’ first few months, mainly from disease.

So what’s the problem with feral pigs? They do extreme damage to the natural world. They destroy fragile wetlands, riversides, grasslands and forests with their bulldozer-like rooting, driving their snouts and tusks deep into the ground and ripping up vegetation. They pollute water by wallowing and defecating. They ravage native wildlife, hunting some ground-nesting birds and amphibians to near extinction and outcompeting native wildlife for resources. One study concluded that mammal and bird habitats are 26% less diverse when feral pigs are present.

But there’s more. They cause at least \$2.5 billion per year in U.S. agricultural damages. They also carry at least 30 serious viral and bacterial diseases and at least 37 parasites with the potential to sicken people and pets and devastate livestock and wildlife. 

Kissin’ Cousins?

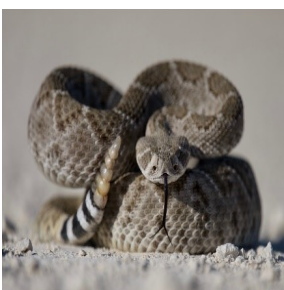


Feral Pigs



Javelina

No. Our native [Texas javelina](#) isn’t related to pigs. It’s in the peccary family.



Diamondback Rattler

But I Read It on the Internet!

A “fact” that’s gone viral is that the presence of feral pigs has caused rattlesnakes to quit rattling. The rattlers fear being detected and hunted by the pigs and so have quickly developed this new trait to escape predation. Or so the story goes. But is it true? Likely not. The truth is that rattlesnakes often don’t rattle, feral pigs aren’t much of a danger and adaptations don’t happen that fast. See what the [experts have to say](#).

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What do they eat? They’re [opportunistic omnivores](#) that eat almost anything, whether it’s plants, animals or carrion. Agricultural crops of any and all kinds are favorites. They also eat arthropods, am-

