

# Wild Pig Newsletter

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## All Join In: Wild Pig Control Concerns Everyone

By: Dr. Maureen Frank, Assistant Professor & Extension Wildlife Specialist

You've heard the numbers. Wild pigs cause millions of dollars of damage in Texas alone, and billions of dollars of damage across the U.S. Reducing the numbers of this nuisance exotic species is a goal shared by many Texas landowners, whether those landowners raise livestock, grow crops, or manage urban properties.

But what if you only own a couple acres of land? Are wild pigs still a problem if your main use of land is seasonal visits to a hunting lease? What if you're in the growing population of Texans who seek places to birdwatch? You might easily guess the answer – wild pigs are a problem no matter which native wildlife species are your favorites, and no matter how you interact with the landscape. This article will provide some information on how wild pigs negatively impact native game species, birds,

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reptiles, and amphibians, and why wild pig control should matter to all Texans who love the outdoors and care about our living natural resources.

### Game Species

The explosion of wild pig populations and decline of quail in recent years has led some to speculate whether the two occurrences are related. While research about the quail decline is ongoing, wild pigs do not actively hunt for quail eggs, or for any other game species. The majority of the diet of a typical wild pig is vegetative matter, such as grasses, forbs, roots, tubers, crops, and prickly pear<sup>1</sup>. Wild pigs are considered “opportunistic omnivores,” meaning that they will eat either plants or animals that are readily available. Oftentimes, mast crops such as acorns or crops such as corn are the most readily available food source for wild pigs. But when a wild pig encounters a newborn fawn, or some quail eggs, those can be an easy meal. So, while the diet of wild pigs is mostly vegetative material, they will certainly also eat animals when given the opportunity.

Wild pigs interact more directly with white-tailed deer. Landowners who put out feeders for deer often find that much of the corn is consumed by wild pigs, which can also be aggressive towards deer. Another issue is the potential for disease transmission between these two mammals.



*Wild pigs compete directly with native wildlife for access to resources such as supplemental feed sites.*

### Non-game Species

Songbirds that nest high in trees are typically safe from predation by hungry wild pigs. Species that nest on the ground or in shrubs, however, are susceptible to wild pigs. The damage caused to non-game birds by wild pigs is magnified by how far many birds travel. Most of Texas’ non-game birds are migratory, with some traveling thousands of miles every year. Some of these species breed in Texas, others spend the winter here, and still others stop in Texas in between their trips north and south. Wild pigs can have substantial negative impacts on the habitats used by breeding and wintering birds, especially riparian and wetland habitats. Because wetland habitats are already threatened by a variety of factors, additional damage to these habitats can endanger native species that rely on wetland environments.

Reptiles and amphibians (collectively referred to as “herps”) often take a back seat to concerns about game species and colorful, melodic songbirds, but native herps are an important part of our ecosystems and provide ecosystem services such as rodent and insect control. Native herps face a myriad of threats that have led to population declines, and predation by wild pigs can be an



*Wild pigs are known to opportunistically consume the eggs of ground nesting birds such as quail and turkeys.*

An indirect impact of wild pigs on quail and other ground-nesting birds is through their alteration of native vegetation. When wild pigs were excluded from an area in one study, forb cover increased in the enclosure area<sup>2</sup>. Forbs are an important food source for quail, so having fewer forbs in areas with wild pigs decreases the availability of the resource to quail. In the same study, bare ground increased outside of the enclosure. Having some bare ground is important for quail, but excessive bare ground reduces cover for quail to nest, hide from predators, and thermoregulate.

additional strain on these already-struggling species. The behavioral adaptations of some herps may make them especially vulnerable to predation by wild pigs. A study in Georgia documented a wild pig that had eaten 49 spadefoot toads after encountering a high concentration of toads that had emerged on a warm, rainy night to breed<sup>3</sup>. As with birds, wild pig damage to riparian and wetland areas can reduce habitat quality for herps.

### **Working Together**

Wild pigs negatively impact a wide variety of native wildlife, so wild pig control can benefit many species and many people who enjoy interacting with wildlife. One technique to improve wild pig control is to cooperate with your neighbors. Maybe you grow crops, but you know your neighbors use their land primarily for quail hunting. Or maybe your neighbors like to bird, so you never thought to ask them to join in on wild pig control efforts. The message of this article is that people with varied wildlife and land-use interests can all benefit from wild pig control! Consider forming a trapping cooperative with your neighbors, coordinating your shooting efforts, or even just keeping each other aware of pig activity on your lands. Wild pig populations can fluctuate locally as pigs move in and out of particular areas or as food sources change. Increasing your surveillance through simply communicating with your neighbors can give you a quick start when control is needed, thereby reducing the damage caused to your land.

Aldo Leopold, who is considered the father of wildlife management, once wrote that “if the land mechanism as a whole is good then every part is good, whether we understand it or not.” Native game and non-game species are important parts of the Texas landscape that are threatened in various ways by wild pigs. We would be wise to take the advice of Leopold, who continued: “To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.”

Regardless of the specific uses for which you and your neighbor manage your land, keep in mind that the deer, quail, songbirds, and herps – every “cog and wheel” – have a place in the ecosystem. Invasive species are a threat to the integrity of our ecosystems and are therefore a common cause behind which many landowners can unite.

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# To Dog or Not to Dog - Perspectives on the Use of Trained Dogs in Wild Pig Management

By: Josh Helcel, Extension Associate, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service generally recommends the use of all available tools in wild pig management. With more wild pigs currently in Texas than in any other state in the U.S., it is a natural conclusion that Texans could use all of the help they can get in abating the damages associated with this exotic invasive species. Legal control techniques currently include trapping, strategic shooting, aerial gunning, snaring and the use of trained dogs, but it is the latter of these methods that often causes polarization among landowners, producers and the dog runners themselves. This article will address a number of commonly held positions of those both against and in favor of this practice, and will also provide research-based information on the effectiveness and strategy involved in using trained dogs to control wild pigs.

## **Common Concerns on the Use of Dogs**

Those against the use of trained dogs as a control measure for wild pigs often cite a number of concerns regarding property boundaries, livestock and native wildlife. Wild pigs attempting to evade pursuing dogs can often travel considerable distances, and the potential exists that pigs may cross one or more property boundaries during this process. The dog handler is then faced with the dilemma of calling off the pursuit in order to avoid trespassing, thereby reducing the success of this method. An even worse alternative, whether intentional or not, is that the dogs and/or handler trespass illegally onto another property. A reasonable solution is to obtain requisite permissions to access adjacent properties when using trained dogs, but in reality this is not always feasible or granted.

Another concern is that inadequately trained dogs may pursue livestock or native wildlife such as white-tailed deer instead of wild pigs. This concern is compounded by the commonly held perception that the disturbance of trained dogs on the landscape may unnecessarily stress or injure livestock and/or direct desired native species off of a property. While research has documented that wildlife species, including wild pigs can abandon areas when exposed to the sustained use trained dogs, the study also observed that this did not occur when this practice was enacted intermittently (Scillitani et al. 2010). Even so, livestock production and the wildlife industry remain primary sources of income for a large number of rural landowners, and many are simply not willing to take any chances when it comes to dog runners on their property.

### **The Case for Trained Dogs as a Management Tool**

There are valid considerations that must be made prior to enacting any control effort for wild pigs. However, research generally supports the use of all legal control methods in Texas for wild pigs – including the use of trained dogs. For example, studies have been conducted worldwide over decades documenting successful wild pig eradication efforts. I am currently unaware of a single successful wild pig eradication study that did not utilize trained dogs in some form; whether through hunting drives, tracking or through direct pursuit and capture (McIlroy and Saillard 1989; Caley and Ottley 1995; Schuyler et al. 2001; Parkes et al. 2010; Muir and McEwen 2007; McCann and Garcelon 2008; Scillitani et al. 2010). This is not to say that successful eradication without dogs is impossible, but rather to evidence that successful wild pig management often requires the use of all available tools.

But there is a catch.

The use of trained dogs is a method that, enacted individually, will generally not reduce wild pig populations. Additionally, documented successful abatement efforts almost exclusively utilized trained dogs as a final measure to remove residual wild pigs after all other control measures had been enacted and populations had already been significantly reduced (Caley and Ottley 1995; Schuyler et al. 2001; Parkes et al. 2010; Muir and McEwen 2007). The premise behind this was that trained dogs were best suited in removing “educated” wild pigs that were not able to be removed through any other means. Trap shy pigs, mature adults, transient boars, and pigs that have otherwise adapted human aversion through incomplete captures or other means usually fall into this category of “educated” wild pigs.

### **A Trained Dog Tall Tale?**

Since I began working for Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, I have learned the importance of using words like “generally” and “potentially.” This is because in wild pig management there can always be exceptions. Each management situation is unique, and every property is different. For example, due to the terrain in the steeper areas of the Texas Hill Country, the assertion that the use of trained dogs might not be capable of reducing populations may not actually be true. In fact, in some instances, it can be argued that dog running is a more effective method than even corral trapping or aerial gunning.

After speaking at an event in Gillespie County, Texas a while back, two gentlemen approached me and politely informed me that they disagreed with some of the research that I had cited including on the use of trained dogs. They told me that due to the thick year-round canopy of Ashe juniper in the region, aerial gunning was ineffective. They went on to explain that nearly every property they encountered was a wildlife or hunting operation in some form, and that due to the continuous widespread availability of supplemental feed even trapping was often ineffective. Finally, they informed me that they routinely removed large sounders of wild pigs using only trained dogs. This was accomplished, they claimed, by their dogs adapting to drive and consistently bay large groups of pigs against the

numerous, steep and often untraversable box canyons in the area. I have never personally witnessed trained dogs bay an entire sounder against a box canyon, nor is this documented in any published studies. However, the *general* reasonability of this claim convinced me that in some circumstances trained dogs may in fact be capable of *potentially* reducing wild pig populations.

## Conclusion

Much like the popular pastime of conventional sport hunting, the recreational value of using trained dogs to pursue wild pigs is important to many Texans. From a management efficacy perspective, however, people often quickly diverge in opinion. Concerns with enacting this practice are valid and considerations must be made including securing legal property access, training dogs effectively and knowing when and how dogs are most effectively implemented as a control technique. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is in the business of providing research based information, and the research continues to affirm the validity of trained dogs among the tools in our wild pig management toolbox.

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*Research shows that trained dogs are often best used last after all other control techniques have been implemented and wild pig populations are already significantly reduced. (Image Credit Opie Dauphin)*

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### How to Snare Wild Pigs

Texas Wildlife Services and AgriLife Extension team up to show you how to effectively snare wild pigs [\(click to view\)](#)

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