

# Feral Hogs in Alabama

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**T** rue wild pigs are not native to Alabama or the New World. Wild swine in North and South America, which may include European wild hogs, feral hogs and hybrids between the two have been introduced. Pigs were domesticated 8,000-9,000 years ago and have spread throughout the world as livestock. In many areas they have escaped or been released from domestication and reverted to a wild, free-ranging or feral state. Published estimates suggested a U.S. population of between 1 and 2 million feral hogs in 1991 and they were the most abundant, free-ranging, introduced ungulate in the U.S. In 1989 wild hogs reportedly occurred in 19 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In the 1980s feral swine in the South were located primarily in the Coastal Plain from Virginia south to Florida, and west to Texas. As early as the 1950s concentrations of wild swine in some areas

of the Southeast were reportedly as high as 75-100 animals per square mile.

## History

The first introduction of swine into the New World theoretically was by Christopher Columbus in 1493 in the West Indies. Hernando De Soto introduced them to the U.S. mainland in 1539 into Florida and in 1542 into Texas. Domestic hogs may have been brought to South Carolina in 1526 and in 1565 Admiral Pedro Mendez reportedly brought 400 pigs to Florida. Other introductions continued in the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama and other areas of the Southeast by adventurers and missionaries throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Settlers, farmers and native Americans promoted the spread of hogs by open range practices that persisted in some states until as recently as the 1960s.



*The timber industry is adversely affected by feral hogs because they destroy seedlings and young trees.*

## Population Distribution

A 1988 survey of feral swine distribution in Alabama suggested significant populations occurred only in those counties of southwest Alabama along the Tombigbee and Alabama rivers.

Apparently during the past 10 years there has been a general statewide spread of these animals aided by individuals who trap or catch wild pigs alive and relocated them to new habitat. Once released, feral swine have an alarming reproductive capacity with sexual maturity on good habitat attained at four to six months of age. After a gestation period of less than four months sows give birth to four to 12 piglets and some sows produce two litters per year. Once established, feral pigs are virtually impossible to eradicate.

## Negative Impacts

Feral hogs are large-bodied, generalist feeders that tend to be rather nomadic and travel in groups. They have few natural enemies other than humans. Feral



*Feral hogs can produce two litters a year.*

swine almost always impact New World habitats negatively and most often are undesirable additions to habitats into which they have been introduced. Feral hogs can damage timber, agriculture, pastures and wildlife openings and their rooting habit is especially damaging because of soil disturbance that increases erosion and alters nutrient cycles. Feral pigs are considered the greatest vertebrate modifiers of natural plant communities since our native plants have not adapted to this rooting behavior. Rooting decreases total woody understory and while recovery of plant communities is variable, species composition may be altered permanently. Rooted areas also are prime spots for invasion by exotic plants.

Feral hogs directly compete with native wildlife for hard and soft mast and many other foods important to deer, turkeys, squirrels and other native species. Feral pigs are serious nest predators and also prey upon birds, mammals (including deer, sheep and goats), reptiles and amphibians. They carry many parasites and diseases such as cholera, pseudorabies, brucellosis, tuberculosis and anthrax. Some or all of these diseases can be transmitted to native wildlife, domestic livestock and humans.

### As a Game Species

Feral swine have been hunted widely in the South and have become an integral part of the social fabric of many rural communities, especially in Florida and Texas and certain areas in the Carolinas, Tennessee, Georgia, Louisiana and Alabama. They make excellent table fare and the trophy value of large males may be economically important in some places. Feral hogs are listed as a game animal by the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and apparently there is an increasing number of hunters interested in pursuing them. However, the list of undesirable effects of high populations of feral pigs is endless. Individuals involved in releasing feral hogs into new range give little thought to the destruction they can cause and every effort should be made to prevent their spread into areas where they do not occur.

Article and photos courtesy of the Alabama Wildlife Federation. 

## FACTS ABOUT FERAL HOGS

- n Feral hogs are present in at least 23 states and are found in most counties in Alabama. Their population and range is increasing.
- n Feral hogs first breed at six months of age and average nearly two litters per year. They average 4 to 7 pigs per litter and breed in cooler months with a 115-day gestation period.
- n A population of feral hogs can double every four months. Numbers can increase from one hog per square mile to 100 hogs per square mile in 3 years.
- n Feral hogs are crafty, intelligent animals and can survive natural hardships. They consume primarily vegetative matter. The meat of feral hogs is lean and delicious.
- n In Alabama the feral swine is categorized as a game animal and can be hunted by licensed hunters year round without limits. They cannot be hunted over bait or at night. If on private land, the landowner's consent is needed. It is illegal to relocate trapped feral hogs.
- n The last cases of brucellosis and pseudorabies in domestic swine in Alabama were in 1996. Since that time, there have been over 20 premises where trapped feral hogs have been found to have one or both diseases. Fortunately, the diseases have not spread back to domestic hogs.
- n Domestic swine owners should not allow their hogs to come in contact with feral hogs. Adequate fencing and sound management practices should be utilized.
- n Brucellosis, also known as Bangs disease or undulant fever, can spread from infected hogs to humans, usually through contact with reproductive fluids and internal organs. It is a debilitating disease in humans requiring extensive antibiotic and supportive treatment. Hunters are especially vulnerable when field dressing feral hogs barehanded. The meat should be cooked thoroughly.
- n Trichinosis, caused by a parasite found embedded in the muscle and Sparganosis, caused by a tapeworm found beneath the skin of infected hogs, can affect humans. Caution should be exercised in handling; thorough cooking will destroy the parasite.
- n Agricultural damage caused by feral hogs includes crops, land, fences and farm equipment. The timber industry is adversely affected through destruction of seedlings and young trees. Monetary loss can be extensive.
- n Feral hogs have a negative impact on wildlife habitat. They are known to compete directly with native game species, cause damage to wildlife food plots and are predators of ground-nesting birds.

*Information provided by the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries.*

