

Man vs. Feral Hogs: Perspectives from the Trans-Pecos

The Borderlands Research Institute for Natural Resource Management, Sul Ross State University

article and photos by Louis A. Harveson

Most of you are all too familiar with feral hogs. I have had my share of run-ins with them during my days in the Texas Post Oak Savannah, Coastal Plains, and Brush Country. However, when I left south Texas some 10-plus years ago and enlisted with the Wildlife Program at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, I thought my days of dealing with the “mammalian cockroach” (aka, feral hogs) were over. Boy was I wrong!

It was only a couple of years into my tenure at Sul Ross that I started to hear people talk about seeing feral hogs in the mountains of west Texas. I first dispelled the sightings, thinking they were spotting the poorly understood and often mislabeled javelina. It wasn't until I spent a day in the field in the upper elevations of the Davis Mountains that I realized there is no place too high, too dry, or too remote for feral hogs. And if you think feral hogs can cause damage on the flat lands of south, east, and central Texas, wait 'til you see the damage they can do on a mountain side with large boulders, pine trees, and a 45-percent slope!

Since that sobering day when I witnessed first-hand the destruction by feral hogs in the pristine mountains of west Texas, our research program has been working with landowners and state and federal agencies to better understand the destruction, distribution, and ecology of feral hogs. We adopted the military philosophy “know your enemy:” the more you know about your adversary the more likely you will be in defeating him.

The feral hog invasion into the deserts of west Texas was likely a result of natural expansion from eastern populations along rivers, streams, and creeks or possibly from an unknown introduction. Re-



Graduate student Bo Adkins prepares to sedate and radio collar a captured feral hog in the Davis Mountains.

gardless of their origin, feral hogs are a threat to some of the most unique biological features in west Texas: riparian habitats (creeks, seeps, springs, cienegas). With free-standing water so rare in the desert, private landowners and resource managers were especially concerned with the hogs' effect on the endemic plants and animals associated with these habitats.

In 2002 we initiated our first study of feral hogs to assess their diet, movements, habitat preferences, and population characteristics (density, survival, and reproductive rates). Recruiting Bo Adkins as a graduate student (now a wildlife biologist for TPWD in the Panhandle) for the project we radioed and monitored 18 feral hogs and collected another 68 hogs for the dietary portion of the study. For two years we tracked the beasts and found both expected and unexpected findings.

As expected, the diet of feral hogs in the Davis Mountains was dominated by grasses (39 percent) and roots and tubers (34 percent), with invertebrates, mast, and other items making up the remainder. Our findings were consistent with other studies from across the state indicating that feral hogs are opportunistic foragers.

A common theory in wildlife ecology is that home range size will decrease with increased resources (animals have shorter distances to travel to meet their energy needs). This theory holds true for feral hogs in Texas, where feral hogs in the Coastal Plains have some of the smallest ranges (830 acres), followed by those in the Brush Country (1,470 acres), and those in west Texas (our study). West Texas feral hogs have some of the largest home ranges ever reported where boars averaged over 14,000 acres while sows

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averaged over 10,000 acres.

Based on intensive radio tracking, we also found that feral hogs were fairly general in their use of habitats. Of the seven broad habitats we delineated, feral hogs used all habitats and only showed preference for the open-canopy pine-oak-juniper woodlands. Feral hogs likely preferred this type of habitat because it provided adequate cover, had abundant mast, and the open-canopy allowed for high grass production.

Luckily, feral hogs of west Texas occur at relatively low densities compared to other regions of the state. In the Coastal Plains, feral hogs have been reported to occur at one hog per 27 acres; in the Brush Country, one hog per 81 acres, and in west Texas we found them at one hog per 380 acres. Unfortunately, the low density of feral hogs in west Texas suggests that control efforts will be more expensive per capita.

What does this all mean? Although we



Extensive damage caused by feral hogs along a mountain side in the Davis Mountains.

may never really know the extent of the ecological damage feral hogs cause to water, soil, or the plant and animal communities, from our studies we know more about the enemy and can use that information to our advantage.

First, to effectively control feral hogs that travel great distances and occur at low densities, use the terrain to your ad-

vantage. Feral hogs, like us, will use the path of least resistance (i.e., saddles, creeks, canyons). Concentrate trapping efforts in these linear travel corridors.

Second, the tremendous home ranges of feral hogs in this study mean that if your neighbor has feral hogs, you have feral hogs. Landowners must work together to have any chance of controlling feral hogs.

Seek help from your neighbors and the experts. A wildlife co-op might be a great way to maximize your resources. In fact, the Nature Conservancy of Texas, USDA-Wildlife Services, and private landowners are presently working together in the Davis Mountains to specifically curtail feral hogs. The co-op is just getting started and will cover over 100,000 contiguous acres in the high country of the Davis Mountains.

Finally, be aggressive and innovative. No battle is won without allies and persistence. 🐾

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