

# Feral Hogs

Texas was not always known as cattle country. Over 300 years ago Spanish explorers introduced hogs to Texas. This wonderful source of salted meat and lard was very important to settlers in the hot and untamed frontier. As more people settled in Texas, more hogs were introduced.

People valued the hogs on their farms and ranches, and owners would keep close watch to make sure they did not escape. When the Texas War for Independence from Mexico broke out, many able-bodied settlers joined the fighting, while entire families abandoned their homes to escape from the approaching Mexican army, leaving their hogs unattended. When Texas won its independence and farmers came home, their hogs were long gone and unfortunately had gone wild, or “feral.”

Today, feral hogs are among the most destructive invasive species in the U.S. As they dig for food with their tusks, the hogs uproot crops, create giant holes and destroy habitat for both ranch animals and wildlife. About \$400 million dollars are annually attributed to the damages these wild animals create. Hogs are omnivores, meaning they eat nearly anything, which often means they consume resources needed by native species to survive. Farmers and ranchers are hard at work to eradicate this serious problem, but the creatures have adapted very well to the environment, especially in Texas, and surprisingly are quite intelligent animals. With a nocturnal nature, above average fertility and no natural predators, feral hogs are becoming a plague to the U.S. Currently about 2 to 6 million inhabit the country, with over half of the population right here in Texas.

The animals look similar to the hogs that you may be familiar with on ranches and farms, but display a few noticeable differences. Feral hogs are covered in stiff hair and have long whiskers, and as they age their color becomes darker. Also, their snouts are longer and narrower, which aids in their destructive rooting behavior. A mature hog can reach a height of 36 inches at the shoulder, and weigh up to 400 pounds. They have razor-sharp tusks and can run surprisingly fast, so keep your distance, particularly from a sow with piglets.

Many people are unaware that feral hogs can make a delicious meal, prepared in many of the same ways as pork from the meat market. Feral hog meat is quite lean and tends to be tough, though so special tenderizers or marinating are beneficial. Hunting hogs for food makes just a tiny dent in this rising population, however, and farmers and ranchers view the growing population of feral hogs as a serious enemy to their property and pocketbook.

As the feral hog population continues to grow and expand, there are increasing concerns that these hogs will ruin the livelihood of people growing crops, permanently alter habitat for livestock and native species, and as they encroach on suburban areas, pose dangers to people and property. State fishing and game organizations are working to educate people about the threat these hogs pose, and the options for trying to manage the feral hog population.

While on the train keep an eye out the window near creeks and streams, and chances are you might be able to catch a glimpse of a feral hog rooting through a field as though it is a salad bar, leaving churned mud in its wake.

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