

FERAL HOGS

HOW SPORTSMEN FUEL THE FIRE

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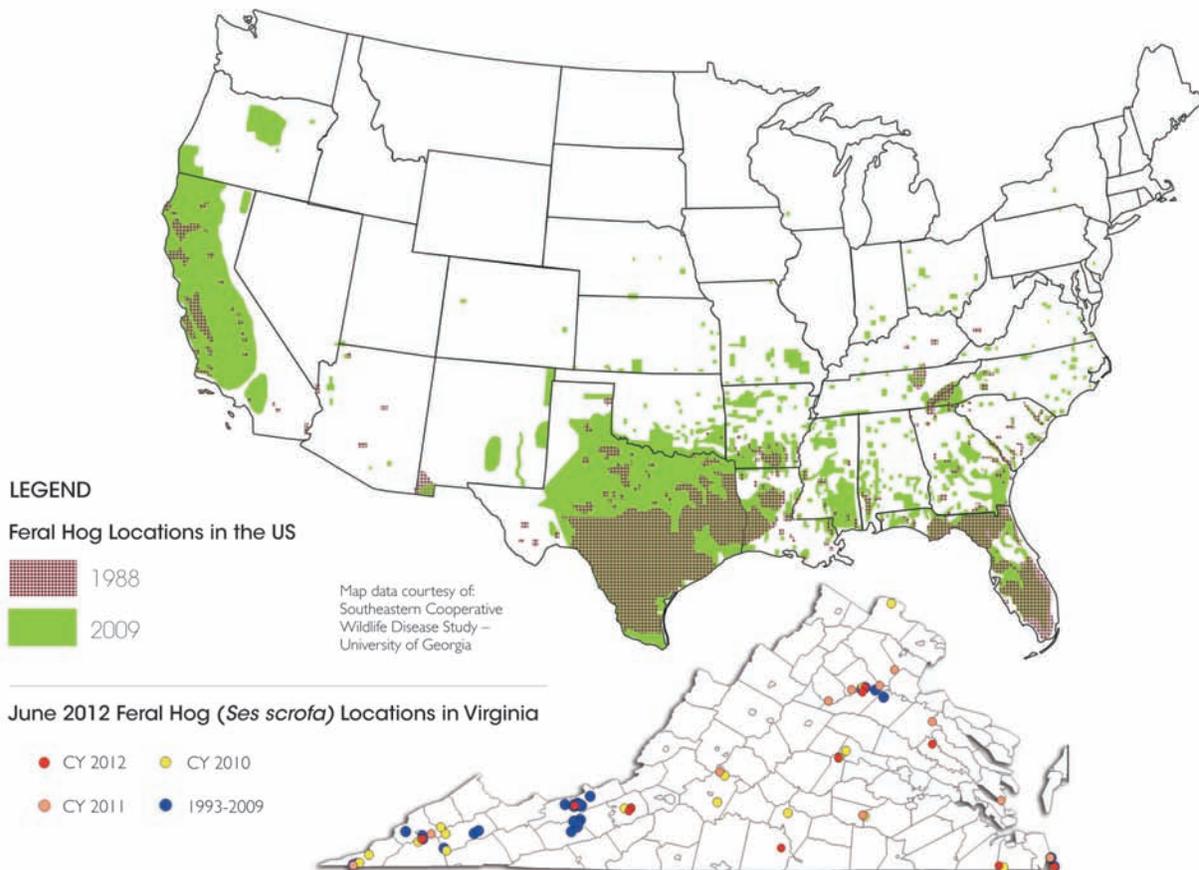
Virginia deer hunters: Please listen up and listen carefully. We have a story to tell you about pigs. This story isn't about a wolf huffing, puffing and blowing any houses down. It is about honest, conservation-minded sportsmen unintentionally and unknowingly fanning the flames of what could be the worst natural resource disaster that Virginia has ever seen. The problem, though, is that this story has already begun to unfold. This article is a call to arms, but not necessarily your favorite deer rifle or shotgun, as you might be thinking. In this case, the weapon of choice is education and awareness, and the best ally we have is you.

Pigs or hogs, (*Sus scrofa*), first appeared in the United States in the 1500s in present day Florida. We can thank the early explorers Columbus and de Soto for realizing that pigs made a hearty livestock animal to bring to the new world. Allowed to roam in the wild, these animals multiplied and were capable of surviving on their own. When meat was needed for dinner, all one had to do was harvest a hog and the feast was on. Too bad the modern-day wildlife

management movement followed these famous explorers by about 400 years. Until the late 1980s, wildlife biologists across the southern U.S. were silently watching feral hog populations creep across the landscape like an undiagnosed disease. Some state wildlife agencies even stocked them as a game animal. In areas where stocking wasn't conducted, non-domestic and wild-looking hogs would still show up mysteriously in new areas. No one claimed to know how these animals got there, what to do with them, or what they could do with them. But a pig is a pig, right? Well, technically, yes. And, since pork is pork, people soon realized that the mysterious animals made tasty table fare. We have an edible animal on the loose, and it's available for the taking. The stage is set, and fire conditions look ominous. Strike a match and lay it in the kindling.

Can you remember back before the internet and mainstream hunting media? Feral hogs and hog hunters weren't pasted all over magazines and television. It was an underground sport where information and locations were shared mouth-to-mouth. When hogs did mysteriously appear in the

Map of feral hog locations in Virginia and the US.





The feral hog populations continue to grow and become more widespread. Controlling this nuisance species to prevent habitat devastation along with diseases that can infect pets, livestock, humans and other wildlife species has become a priority with game and fish agencies throughout the country. This trail camera photo taken in Culpeper County clearly shows the damage done by a group of feral hogs to a wildlife food plot. Photo provided by VDGIF

wild, phone calls to state wildlife agencies were most likely handled in this manner: (1) they're not a game animal; (2) nobody has claim to them as a livestock animal; so (3) we'll call it a nuisance species— go ahead and try to control them year-round. As traditional deer hunters began to harvest these tough and rugged feral animals, a light bulb flickered on. You mean to tell me that these things are tasty, a nuisance animal with a year-round open season, and they are fun to shoot?! Throw a log on that flame... better make it two.

Many people confuse or don't really care about the distinction between true Russian wild boars and feral hogs of domestic lineage. In reality it doesn't matter. Most wild hogs these days are a mix of Russian and domestic strains. All wildlife agencies are describing the same thing whether termed wild hog or feral hog. A wild or feral hog is nothing more than a pig surviving on its own, free from the influence of humans. No fences, no barns, no Farmer Brown. Feral hog females (called "sows") are capable of producing 3 litters of pups consisting of 4-8 piglets every 14 months and can be capable of reproduction as young as 5 months of age. While Virginia's predator species, such as coyote and bobcat, can take piglets, once a feral hog reaches about 40 pounds at approximately 6 months of age, there really

aren't any natural predation threats. And I thought rabbits reproduced quickly? We have a nice fire going now; time to scoot our chairs back a bit.

Feral hogs are known to contain at least 45 different diseases and parasites that can

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infect pets, livestock, humans, and other wildlife species. They have been documented destroying game bird nests, taking deer fawns, and even newborn livestock animals. They can severely damage or destroy sensitive wetland and marsh communities, stir up sedimentation in our waterways, and can out-compete turkeys, deer, and bear for ever-important food sources. If you think the National Forest deer herd is in bad shape

now, wait until there are pigs competing for that same life-sustaining acorn crop. Do you worry that the food plots you broke your back and bank to establish will have a hard time surviving a dry spell? Try having a group of feral hogs come through it overnight. The scene would make a warehouse of garden tillers jealous. According to a fellow wildlife biologist, with the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission, regarding the impact of feral hogs on crop fields, "If you think you've seen a corn field torn up by deer or bears, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Most hunters, and anyone who flips through the television channel lineup, have seen that feral hogs have come a long way in recent years - both geographically and in terms of popularity. They have become a huge focus in the hunting industry, taking up time on hunting shows and filling pages in the magazines we read. As of December 2012, there was at least one magazine published that is completely dedicated to hunting wild hogs. Hunters travel far and pay good money to hunt these animals. Do a quick internet search and you will find firearms and ammunition specifically marketed for hog hunting. There has been more than one television series dedicated to the "reality" of chasing down these creatures for profit...and of course to save property, crops, and wildlife resources, right? Nothing



The track of a whitetail deer and a wild pig is similar. However, with a closer look the hoof print of the pig is a dead give away. Photo provided by the VDGIF

makes sense or saves the day like trucking your horses, dogs, UTVs, and a camera crew down the interstate to capture one nasty boar with a nickname that has just been wreaking havoc on a rancher's fences. I heard he had 4-inch tusks, weighed 750 pounds, and once ate a rusty Volkswagen Beetle in the back pasture! The show may conclude something like this... "No problem sir, it was a long and hot day, but we got that boar...he won't be messin' up your fences anymore. Load those horses and dogs, then get that hog on the truck...our work here is done." Did you catch the part earlier where I said they reproduce like rabbits? Maybe there aren't any other hogs around and this was the only one there? Maybe they'll have a crew search for more hogs after the filming stops? Nonsense. All the while we watched the excitement from our couches and couldn't help but think it looked fun. Where can I go do that? I sure would like to hunt these pesky hogs to try to wipe them out. Let me search around and see where we have hogs. Whew, that fire is really cooking now... let's wait a while before we throw another log on.

As I write this, a Google search of "hog hunting" revealed 3,110,000 hits in 0.38 seconds. Still don't think it's a problem? Pigs are not migratory animals. We have found that they don't even range as much as our native white tailed deer and black bear. Our best data shows that 17 states reported feral hog populations in 1988. Compare that to 2009 where we now have feral hogs in at least 45 states (see inset). While no one ever willingly comes forth to wildlife agencies and admits they have moved or released feral

hogs to the wild, we have to assume that the supply and demand system is the reason we've seen this drastic range expansion. If there are people who want hogs on the landscape for hunting purposes, there will be people willing to move and release them to establish new populations. Wildlife biologists down south have referred to this drastic range expansion as "the pig bomb." And to throw gas on the fire, almost all states designate hogs as a nuisance species. What else are they to do? Therefore, feral hogs are treated much like coyote (typically with a year-round hunting season), so we have the perfect self-sustaining nuisance animal that feeds its own success. Our fire has now jumped the ring, and flames are racing in all directions. If we don't do something quick we'll burn it all down.

Some hog hunting enthusiasts surely know those who willingly move or release hogs. But what about the other major portion of our hunting community? The ethical and conservation-minded hunter who desires to hunt hogs is inadvertently feeding the demand for those who are willing to illegally move and release hogs to new areas. Feral hogs in new areas lead to people who want to hunt them, which in turn feed the hog hunting craze. You don't believe me? It has already happened here in Virginia...on public land. A suspicious group of Russian-strain hogs appeared out of nowhere and when local word got out, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) staff in that area handled dozens of calls from hunters about what, when, where, and how to get at them.

I'll bet that revelation alone will result in at least one of you calling and trying to find out where on earth this atrocity happened... and not because you intend on doing a thorough investigation. Some of you will not be able to resist. That's exactly what we're fighting, and it's exactly the opposite of what we need. We need information, leads, and inquiries as to who released these animals. To the conservation-minded hunter the introduction of feral hogs shouldn't be a reason to get excited and plan a hunt; rather it should generate an overall response much like a crime. This is a crime against our natural resources and the very wildlife we have entrusted ourselves to manage.

Next, you must be convinced that hog hunting doesn't control hog populations. All it does is create more hog hunting. There has not been one documented case in North America of hunting alone controlling a breeding, self-sustaining population of feral swine in the wild. Don't believe me? We have dedicated hog shooters at this moment in Virginia who are honestly attempting to help landowners who have feral hogs. One group alone has accounted for a few hundred in recent years, but even they admit, along with landowners, that it has not driven back populations or stopped the damage to crops and habitat. Those knowledgeable or

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seasoned at hog control methods will admit that sharpshooting and hunting efforts only remove a small portion of a population, and those that survive become educated regarding spotlights and know to run when a gun goes bang. One dead hog is better than none, but efforts to control feral hog populations can range from successful to making the problem worse. There's a thin line here with regards to our success or failure.

It's not that shooting a hog is bad; it's just that shooting is not the most successful method of control. Successful efforts

towards hog eradication by landowners and citizens should involve stopping the movement and release of hogs and targeted trapping efforts. Landowners with hog problems don't need knocks at their doors or phone calls every day by those eager to hunt, as expressed by one landowner in Virginia who is getting requests almost daily. They need cooperation with local and state natural resource agencies and a network of friends and sportsmen willing to roll up their sleeves and fight this foreign foe. This is indeed a call to arms hunters, but leave the guns and hunting out of it. The VDGIF has recently teamed up with partner agencies and is working on this tremendously large and complex problem. We need your support to tighten down on those responsible for introducing feral swine into our state and amongst our native wildlife and habitats. Please tell everyone you can that you do not want feral hogs in Virginia. Tell your friends, neighbors, organizations, and elected officials. We need you to be what you've always been: Our biggest and strongest ally. For the love of wildlife, conservation, and our sport, don't let a new and viral sideshow sport unwind nearly a century of sportsmen-driven conservation work here in Virginia. For more information please visit <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/feral-hogs>.

Editors Note: Aaron Proctor is a district wildlife biologist with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Proctor covers the southeastern portion of the state and welcomes questions and comments from our readers. He can be contacted at aaron.proctor@dgif.virginia.gov.



Hunting for wild pigs has become very popular throughout the south. This picture was taken at a special youth hunt, hosted by the Quality Deer Management Association in the Chattahoochee River area of Georgia. Wildlife professionals indicate that shooting is not considered to be the most effective way of control for wild pigs. Hunters and landowners should address the problems that have occurred from the movement and release of hogs and target trapping efforts. Photo provided by www.QDMA.com

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