News Article
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Roger Vines
County Extension Coordinator

Feral Pigs - The Unseen Invasion

Hunting season is fast approaching. For most hunters this means making plans for the pursuit of a big buck, or a vest full of squirrels, an exciting dove shoot, or harvesting other game species. But there is an animal that some enjoy hunting that has become a major pest throughout the state - introduced feral pigs.

By most accounts, wild pigs are fascinating animals, both smart and highly adaptive. Yet, for Alabama landowners, that's precisely the problem. The animals, commonly known as feral pigs, are wreaking all sorts of environmental havoc throughout Alabama, the United States and even in various locations around the world.

The problem, already considered bad, is getting worse. Isolated until a few years ago to only a handful of states, these wild pigs have steadily expanded into other parts of the country. Once limited almost exclusively to the southwest region of Alabama, the pigs can now be found in virtually all 67 counties.

While these animals may be comparative newcomers, they adapt quickly to their environment. One of the main reasons is that the pigs, much like rabbits, are prolific breeders. As one wildlife scientist explained, the animals, "pound for pound, have the highest reproductive capacity of any mammal."

Also, feral pigs are not picky about their food, they feed on garbage, vegetation, worms and even small animals. Also each time a feral pig eats an acorn, that's one that a deer does not get to eat, and every earthworm consumed is one that a turkey misses. The pigs compete directly with our native wildlife for food and resources.

Dr. Jim Armstrong, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System wildlife scientist states that once the pigs reach about 30 or 40 pounds, there is not much in the way of food competitors or predators willing to mess with them. Our small predators such as bobcats, foxes, hawks, snakes and even coyotes don't usually pose any threat to the pigs, so there is little to control their numbers.

Auburn University researchers who have been studying the pigs have been fascinated by some of the genetic traits associated with many of these animals, especially near Fort Benning, an area of especially high feral pig encroachment. Many of these animals reflect the characteristics of domestic pigs and wild boars brought by hunters to North Carolina almost a century ago.

Researchers have speculated that this combination of genetics, the feeding and breeding efficiency of domestic pigs coupled with the fierceness of the wild boar, has enhanced the animal's survivability and reproduction.

Still, genetics alone can't account for the rapid spread of feral pig populations. People also appear to play a major role. It is suspected that some hunters, who may be unaware of the environmental impact of the pigs, are capturing wild pigs and moving them into new areas. What else would explain why the distribution of these animals is increasing faster than normal population expansion?

Why would anyone knowingly contribute to the spread of such a highly destructive animal? It's a simple question with a simple answer: The pigs' unique sporting attributes. Despite all the damage these animals cause, many hunters consider them to be an ideal sporting animal. In addition to being smart, they also have a keen sense of smell and run well with dogs. And of course some like the bar-b-que.

Most of the hunters who introduce these animals into new habitats have no idea of the harm they're causing to the environment. The pigs have been described as natural born rototillers, wreaking all sorts of ecological havoc. And like most introduced species, such as kudzu and others, once they get started it's hard to reverse.

For now, researchers are conducting studies to determine the animals' population distribution, feeding habits and what happens to young feral pigs after they are weaned. Scientists hope the research will help them develop better methods for controlling feral pig numbers. They also hope to inform the public about the damage done by these animals and hopefully reduce the spread of this pest.