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Wild hogs: the good, the bad and the ugly

By Kent Kammermeyer

Much to the delight of big game hunters and much to the chagrin of many landowners and managers, wild hogs are on the increase in North Georgia.



For The Times

The population of free-ranging hogs, such as those pictured above, is on the rise in North Georgia.

To say the least, wild hogs are controversial in Georgia. They are not even considered a "game animal" or "wildlife" and therefore are only marginally referenced in Georgia law and regulations as enforced by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "Feral hogs" (feral meaning free-ranging) is a more accurate name for wild hogs which are normally considered domestic but live in a wild state. They are often mixed with "Russian" boar that were turned loose in Georgia and North Carolina years ago. **The bottom line is that feral hogs are considered the property of the landowner upon whose ground they are currently standing who has control over the harvest of the animals.**



Columnist Kent Kammermeyer

The good news for hunters is obvious. Another "big game animal" makes life more interesting for the hunter and can fill the freezer with tasty meat. What could be more interesting than to go on a buck, bear, boar hunt in the North Georgia mountains and have a good chance at bagging any of the three? There is something extra stimulating

Special opportunity hog hunts

- Swallow Creek WMA, Feb. 9-11
- Lake Burton WMA, Feb. 9-11
- Warwoman WMA, Feb. 16-18

Big game centerfire rifles allowed. Blazer orange required. Sign in at check station.

about hunting hogs because of the great abundance of sign they make in the woods in the form of rooting, wallows and tracks. However, right here is where the good news ends with hogs.

The bad news is cause for much concern. Hogs compete directly with deer, turkeys, squirrels, grouse, bears, songbirds, etc. for the same limited food supply in the woods. Acorns are obvious and especially important to these species, but it doesn't end there. Hogs are extremely omnivorous and eat a little of everything including grass and clover (planted in food plots for deer), fruits, roots, insects, grubs, salamanders and small mammals.

The overall relationship is clear: more hogs equals less of all other wildlife species, especially deer and turkeys. Strong evidence already points to the hog-deer negative relationship.

The last straw regarding hogs is the ugly angle. It's the habitat destruction caused by rooting. Hogs don't discriminate, they root in agricultural crops, food plots and forests. I recently saw a five-acre deer food plot turned over from one end to the other by hog rooting. It doesn't end there. Hogs have been known to disrupt entire ecosystems, including endangered plants and animals.

No wonder the U.S. Forest Service and DNR Wildlife Resources Division both take a dim view of hogs on the Chattahoochee National Forest (CNF) and state lands in North Georgia.

This brings up the huge question. Where are North Georgia hogs coming from?

There is no doubt that hogs are increasing in North Georgia. They are expanding their range by prolific reproduction and nomadic movement on their own, as well as being stocked illegally by misinformed hog enthusiasts on both private and public lands. Besides being illegal, the practice is ignorant and destructive. The same "hog hunters" who do this are the folks who complain about the lack of deer in North Georgia. Is there a connection? Guaranteed. More hogs, fewer deer.

What's the solution? Keep hunting pressure high and remove as many hogs as possible. This is obviously the good news for hunters. The only restrictions on hog hunting are those which apply to the Chattahoochee Forest (CNF) and WMAs (on or off the CNF).

Basically, hogs are legal on all open dates for small game hunting from now through the end of February on Northeast Georgia WMAs and the CNF with small game weapons (.22 magnum or muzzleloaders are best). The WMAs in Northeast Georgia with hog populations are Dawson Forest (Burnt Mountain and upper Amicalola tract), Cooper's Creek, Chattahoochee, Chestatee, Cohutta, Rich Mountain, Lake Burton, Swallow Creek and Warwoman.

Hog populations can be spotty and somewhat nomadic. Check with the Wildlife Resources Division (770-535-5700) for more specifics on the WMAs or for a free booklet entitled "Feral Hogs in Georgia."

The only public land in North Georgia other than state-operated WMAs is on CNF lands outside of WMAs. Huntability hog populations exist in a few isolated spots. Probably the best, most promising area is the Popcorn Creek,

Charlie's Creek, Coleman River area of Forest land in Rabun County, which lies east and northeast of Lake Burton WMA and Ga. Hwy. 76.

There are also hogs showing up in the Tray Mountain Wilderness Area to the south of Lake Burton WMA and east of Tray Mountain.

On private lands, hog hunting is less restricted. There are no firearms, season or daily bag limit restrictions for taking feral hogs. However, no hunting over bait or from a vehicle is allowed. You can hunt at night with a 6-volt or smaller light.

Spotty hog populations on private lands occur south and east of Hall County in Hart, Madison, Elbert, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Greene and Wilkes. Many Times readers have deer leases in one of these counties. If you don't hunt hogs, invite your friends to do so for the good of your deer property and the freezer.

Scouting for hog sign is easier than scouting for buck sign. Hogs are notorious rooters and often turn over large areas of forest and agricultural land. Rooting usually consists of large irregular areas where turf, dirt and humus are turned over or long wavy, wandering lines of ruffled up leaves. The No. 1 hog food source is acorns. If acorns are already gone, then hogs will be found in grassy openings or rooting white pines.

Finally, for excellent wild hog hunting and all the accommodations within an hour's drive from Gainesville, contact Mitch Slay at Eagle Rock Plantation in Oglethorpe County (706-743-7659) or go to www.eaglerockplantation.com

February is a good month to hog hunt due to the gap between deer and turkey hunting season. Bring home the bacon.

Kent Kammermeyer is a certified wildlife biologist. His column appears monthly.

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