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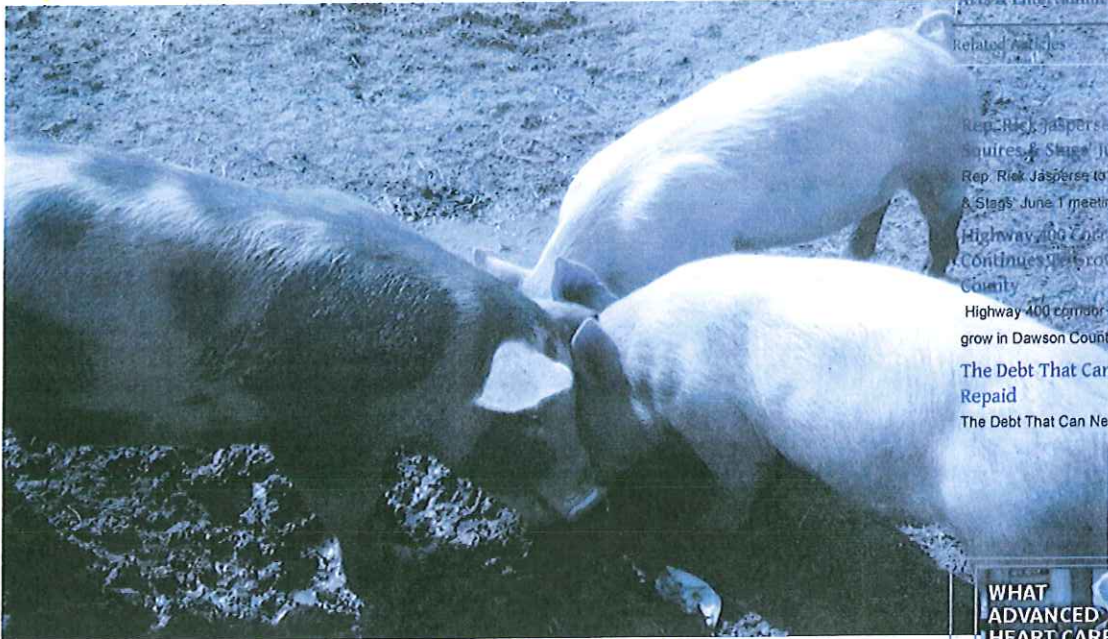
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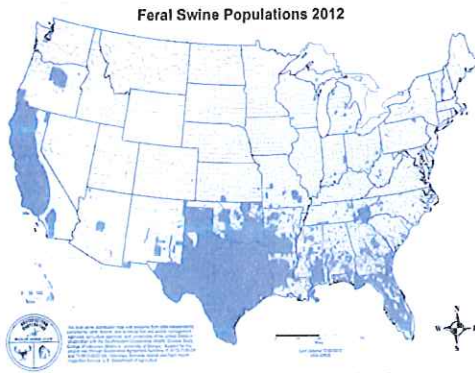
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While domestic pigs are confined and raised mostly for food, they are directly descended from the same wild pigs currently degrading land across the country.

## Pigs gone wild!



This 2012 map illustrates reported sightings of wild pigs. Image courtesy of Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, University of Georgia

By Melissa Harvey

The pigs are coming! No, not cute, domesticated, petting zoo pigs. We're talking wild pigs—big, hairy beasts that don't belong in the United States, let alone the mountains of North Georgia. Invasive pests wandering around the country uninvited, heedless of the chaos that follows

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While not yet a well-known problem outside of farmers and land and wildlife conservationists, it is, nonetheless, an epidemic quickly encroaching on lands all over North America. More than anywhere else, these feral pigs are blazing a trail of destruction across the southeastern U.S., from Texas to Florida and reaching as far north as Virginia.



Chris Hester/MSU, Alabama DNR

"Given current resources, we are not able to keep up with the population growth of feral swine, which means wild pigs will continue to encroach on lands in Georgia and throughout the country." Photo courtesy of wildpiginfo.msstate.edu

#### History of wild pigs in the United States and Georgia

A wild pig or hog is an animal belonging to the species *Sus scrofa*. These animals are not native to the United States. They are mostly a mix of domestic pigs originally introduced to North America by early explorers (thank you very much, Christopher Columbus) and Eurasian wild boars brought here by wealthy sportsmen for hunting and gaming purposes. Over the past century and a half, their numbers have exploded nationwide. They are currently second only to whitetail deer in numbers hunted and harvested every year.

Pigs reach reproductive maturity early in life, usually around six to 10 months, and a healthy sow can produce as many as three litters, each averaging six babies, over the course of 14 months. What started as a handful of pigs transplanted by hunters quickly escalated into an overwhelming problem. In 1992, wild pig sightings were reported in 17 states; in 2010, they were reported in 36 states, and specialists estimate they are in as many as 45 states today.

The most common wild pigs are hybridized versions of domestic hogs bred with the imported Eurasian species. Most are black or dark brown in color but can also be blond, white or red. Adult males average 220 pounds, adult females 155 pounds.

Wild pigs most likely were introduced into the southern parts of Georgia by explorer Hernando de Soto in the 1540s, extending across the state as far north as present-day Augusta. Over time, hog populations expanded into the interior parts of the state and farther north into the Carolinas. Today, there are reports of feral hogs in virtually every county in Georgia.



Domestic pigs are raised mostly for food and are directly descended from the same wild pigs currently degrading land across the country. Photo by Melissa Harvey

#### Damage done

While farmers in North Georgia are aware of the wild pigs, there does not seem to be a lot of damage done to farms in the area—at least, not yet. Farmers, including Suzy Wright of Mountain Valley Farms in Ellijay and Corey Deyette of Wolfscratch Farms in Jasper, theorize one reason is the heavy presence of private and gated communities surrounding the farms. These more densely built-up and populated areas discourage pigs from rooting the ground and creating wallows. This is, of course, speculation not based on scientific data, and the threats these pigs pose could soon be felt in these areas.

Adam Hammond, wildlife biologist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, posits the reasons pigs are less prevalent in the North Georgia mountains are temperature and lack of agricultural land. Cold winters make it difficult for pigs to establish themselves. Hammond suggests the blizzard in 1993 took out a lot of the pig population, and the numbers haven't increased dramatically in the area since then. Wild hogs are a much bigger nuisance on farms farther south, where more land is dedicated to agriculture. It's easy pickings down there, with fewer mountains and blizzards.

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Wild pigs are decimating natural preserves like the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area farther north as well. Most damage occurs due to the pigs rooting—turning over soil or ground cover in search of food. This continual turning over and trampling destroys plants' root systems. Pigs also create wallows (large mud pits) used for cleaning and cooling themselves.

Many farmers consider keeping pigs from rooting and eating their crops to be a full-time job. It is difficult to successfully replant and re-establish crops before the pigs return. Rooting and wallowing not only kills the plant life, it also decreases the amount of available food and habitat for other native species in the area. This puts them in direct competition for resources with the surrounding wildlife in any area they inhabit.

#### Disease

Unfortunately, the destruction is not limited simply to the land and wildlife. These pigs are carriers of zoonotic diseases—illnesses that can pass between a given species and humans. This puts those who handle these pigs at risk. Often, it is not direct contact with the animals that transmits the disease; it is the parasites brought in with them, such as ticks, mites and lice.



Feral pigs are blazing a trail of destruction across the southeastern U.S., from Texas to Florida and reaching as far north as Virginia. Photo courtesy of [wildpiginfo.msstate.edu](http://wildpiginfo.msstate.edu)

According to Dr. Skip Jack, director of veterinary medicine and professor of pathology and population medicine at Mississippi State University, the most common zoonotic disease is leptospirosis, a bacterial disease that affects kidney liver and reproductive function in animals as well as humans.

In Georgia, one of the most dangerous zoonotic diseases carried by wild pigs is swine brucellosis, a bacterial infection that typically presents recurring and persistent symptoms, including fevers, chills, sweating, loss of appetite and weight loss.

Another illness found in Georgia is pseudorabies. While it has nothing to do with rabies, despite the name, it is still serious. It is not a zoonotic disease, so people are not susceptible to it. It can, however, be transmitted to other species; domestic animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats, dogs and cats can contract pseudorabies, and it is often fatal.

#### Taking action

Michael Bodenchuk, Texas state director of wildlife services says, "Feral hog management with tools available right now is limited to reducing damage to acceptable levels." Control is difficult because pigs can make lots of babies very quickly and are highly adaptable to a variety of environments.

The two best control devices at our disposal are hunting and trapping, and these are not enough to stabilize the wild pig population. Annual hunts remove an average of 20 percent of pigs throughout the country. In order to maintain a stable population and begin reducing the number of wild pigs, hunters and trappers must remove an average of 60 percent every year, according to Dr. Jack Mayer, research scientist and manager at the Savannah River National Laboratory. Until that number is reached, pig populations will continue to expand throughout the southeast and the rest of the United States.

Live traps are considered the most efficient and effective tool for pig capture and dispatch. Pigs are highly intelligent and will avoid obvious traps; they must be outsmarted, using patience and cunning in order for trapping to work to any appreciable degree. It is illegal to relocate wild pigs to other areas, so trapped pigs are euthanized.

#### Conclusion

Wild pigs are considered enemy number one to the conservation of land and wildlife in the southeastern U.S. They don't belong here and the problem is getting worse over time. While their presence is not large in Northwest Georgia, a look at a map marked with reported sightings reveals wild pigs on every side. The damage and disease they bring with them have leveled once-fertile lands in some places to scenes resembling moonscapes.

These pests were brought here by early settlers and explorers who could not possibly have known the eventual consequences of their actions. Still, wild pigs are not a problem to be taken lightly. Given current resources, we are not able to keep up with the population growth of

feral swine, which means wild pigs will continue to encroach on lands in Georgia and throughout the country.

Hide your plants and your pets. The pigs are coming!

For more information, including current hunting rules and restrictions in Georgia as well as further details about the topics discussed in this article, visit [gohuntgeorgia.com](http://gohuntgeorgia.com), or call the Amuchee game management office (Northwest Georgia region), 706-295-6041. Another resource is the Mississippi State University wild pig information page, [wildpiginfo.msstate.edu](http://wildpiginfo.msstate.edu).

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