

Bringing Home the Bacon

Feral Hogs Offer a Different Challenge

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Feral hogs can devastate a landscape, and are considered pests in states where they occur.

Feral hogs are common in many southern states. They are continuing to expand throughout the U.S., often due to illegal releases. This is definitely not good for the ecosystems they disrupt. Hogs can inflict incredible damage to sensitive plant communities and devour endangered species, not to mention damage agricultural crops. Remember the food plot you worked on for the last few years? Give a dozen hogs a day and you'll be starting all over again.

The only good news about hogs is hunting them. Bag limits and seasons are extremely liberal, if there are any at all, and they provide excellent table fare (You'll want to avoid the very old and very large if you want the best-tasting pork). Many hunt clubs and outfitters offer hog hunts at reasonable rates during the off season, or you can combine hog hunting with turkey or deer hunts. With a little homework, you can put together a hog hunt on public land to fit anyone's budget. You also don't need a week's vacation to effectively hunt hogs, a long weekend is perfect.

More Ways Than One Way to Hunt a Hog

Like deer hunting, there are many ways to hunt hogs and nearly all can be effective. The more hogs living in an area, the better your chance of harvesting one. Here are a few of the most popular methods for bringing home the bacon.

Hunting With Dogs

Using dogs to hunt hogs is quite popular in the south. However, it's not a do-it-yourself hunt. If you are looking for an adrenaline rush and a new and unique hunting experience, it might be for you, though you'll need to find an outfitter with a pack of hog dogs. I recently had my first experience of hunting hogs with dogs, and I can't resist telling the story.

Hogs and Dogs in the Swamp

The morning of May 20, 2005 found me bouncing down a logging road in the floodplain of the Savannah River in Georgia, crammed onto the bench seat of a pickup truck with two "good ole" southern boys, Tal Mimms and Rollie Hamilton. The names are real, and I couldn't make them up if I tried. The bed of the truck contained a precarious stacking of two dog boxes filled to the brim with eight mixed-breed dogs. The smallest of these was about 55 pounds, the largest about 90 pounds, and most had a heavy sprinkling of pit bull in their family tree. There was no doubt now, we were going hog hunting!

The swamp bordered both sides of the road. Cypress and gum trees rose out of the greasy black

water, nearly blocking out the sun in some places. In others, sunlight streamed down on patches of switch cane and saw palmetto that grew so thick you couldn't see your feet when you stood in it.

Hogs had rooted up the berm of the road at odd intervals. These rootings could be a single crater 18 inches deep or several square yards of turned up soil. After seeing this, it is no wonder why hogs are regarded as a nuisance animal. The soil in the rootings was loose and wet, probably less than a few hours old. The hogs were close.

Suddenly the truck lurched to a stop. Coffee cups, a tape measure, and notepads slid across the dash and rattled against the windshield. Rollie yelled, "Der's a hawg right der," as we bailed out of the truck. He and Tal rushed to the tailgate, me close on their heels. They unlatched the dog boxes and the doors flew open, releasing a churning mass of teeth, nylon, and Kevlar. The dogs wear thick nylon collars and Kevlar vests to protect them from the hog's tusks. The dogs were already barely visible out in front of us through the swamp when we were just a few yards from the truck. Apparently there is a learning curve on running through the swamp. Tal and Rollie seemed to be having a much easier time than me negotiating knee deep mud, cypress knees, and downed logs. I was finally gaining on them with the dogs 150 yards ahead when Rollie stopped. He pointed at a spot beside him that I couldn't see and said, "watch dat cottonmouth." What was I getting myself into?



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Hogs can do major damage to crop fields and forests.

We caught up to the dogs just as we broke through a switch cane patch. In an opening the size of a boxing ring, three of the dogs had a hog cornered. The dogs grabbed a hold of the hog and Tal swiftly shot it. Rollie produced chains for the three dogs and we tied them off to trees. We had five more dogs to find. They apparently were after another hog we hadn't seen.

Two hours later we finally had all of the dogs rounded up. I was soaked with sweat and swamp water, covered with mud, and laughing with two southern fellows as if we'd hunted together for years. We never did see the second hog. The dogs lost it at the edge of some deeper water. It's probably fortunate for us or we might have still been chasing them. Rollie explained to me that some hogs are runners and some are fighters. We had encountered one of each.

Stand Hunting

Hogs can be very nomadic. They move to a food source, eat all they can, and move on. Because of this, it is not very effective to hunt trails like you would for deer. However, baiting is often allowed for hunting hogs and can be extremely effective. Laws can be different on public and private land when it comes to baiting. Always be sure to check local regulations.

Hogs tend to move most at dusk and dawn, especially where they get hunted often. This is when it is most likely for them to visit bait. The longer you can bait an area before hunting it the better. Hogs can find bait within a few hours, but three or four days is a safer bet. Hogs will eat almost anything. Corn works well, and it's relatively cheap and easy to come by.

If baiting is not allowed, or doesn't appeal to you, stand hunting can work at natural food sources. You'll need to do some scouting, preferably in the morning. If you can find an area with a lot of fresh rooting, chances are you have found a good stand location.

Stalking

Stalking may be the most effective way to harvest a hog. Many successful hog hunters agree the key to finding hogs is to cover a lot of ground. Don't still hunt, just move steadily and look around. If you find fresh sign, then you can slow down and start to use your other senses.

A group of hogs can make a lot of noise while feeding. You can often hear a group of them snorting and squealing as they root through the leaf litter. Hogs have good hearing and sense of smell, but they are nearsighted. A hog is most vulnerable to a shot when its nose is in the ground and other hogs near it are making noise.

Stalking can work at any time of day. During mid-day, hogs can be in thick cover making it tough to get a clear shot. However, this can vary due to weather and hunting pressure. Heavy hunting pressure can make hogs nearly nocturnal and cold nights and mornings usually make them more active at noon.

A hog hunt can be a great cure for cabin fever or a nice bonus to a deer or turkey hunt. When choosing the right gear for shooting a hog, understand that a hog's bone structure is much heavier than that of a deer. Hogs can also have heavy layers of fat that reduce bleeding from even mortal wounds, making tracking challenging. I would encourage you to take only quartering away shots with archery gear. This is especially important on large boars with heavy ribs that nearly overlap.

Hogs can be extremely variable in size and appearance. They can be white, red, tan, black, spotted, or any mix of colors. Russian boars tend to be black. At nearly any time of year you can encounter piglets. Large adults in the wild can exceed 200 pounds, with 300-pound animals being very rare.

Most wild populations are mostly feral hogs. This means that somewhere in the past these hogs were domestic but escaped and have become a wild breeding population. Many outfitters will proclaim their hogs as Russian boars if there is only a little Russian in the bloodline. It doesn't make much of a difference what you call them, but don't be fooled into paying a premium price.

Do some prep work, have a great hunt, and grill those chops well done!



The author with his wild hog recently harvested in Georgia.