Florida Feral Hog
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Florida’s wild hogs are referred to as feral hogs or swine and are of three general types: free-ranging swine that come from domesticated stock, Eurasian wild boar, and hybrids of the two. Technically, the term “feral” refers to free-ranging animals descended from domesticated stock, but all wild hogs in Florida are referred to as feral, whether they descend from wild boar or from domesticated stock. Likewise, all wild hogs in Florida are considered the same species, Sus scrofa. It is believed that the hogs were brought to Florida by Spanish explorers in either 1521, by Ponce de León, or in 1539, by Hernando de Soto. Both had established settlements in Charlotte Harbor in Lee County and brought the hogs for food. Now, more than 500 years later, and feral hogs are found in every county in Florida and in at least 35 states, including most of the Southeast, and Canadian provinces. Florida’s wild hog population is the second largest population in the nation, estimated to have more than 500,000 wild hogs in a relatively stable population. It is second only to the numbers found in Texas. An estimated 1 to 2 million wild hogs are believed to be found in the southeastern United States.

Opportunistic eaters, feral hogs love acorns, but they will eat almost anything, including dead animals. When natural foods are scarce or inaccessible, hogs will forage on almost any agricultural crop and livestock feed. They also feed on tree seeds and seedlings, causing significant damage in forests, groves and plantations. In Florida and the Southeast, this may be a problem in regenerating long-leaf pine forests. In addition to the effects of consuming, knocking down and trampling large amounts of native vegetation and crops, the rooting behavior of wild hogs causes significant damage. Rooting — digging for foods below the surface of the ground — destabilizes the soil surface, uprooting or weakening native vegetation, damaging lawns and causing erosion. Their wallowing behavior destroys small ponds and stream banks, which may affect water quality. They also prey upon ground-nesting wildlife, including sea turtles. Wild hogs compete for food with other game animals such as deer, turkeys and squirrels, and they may consume the nests and young of many reptiles, ground-nesting birds and mammals. Millions of dollars are spent each year to prevent damage from hogs.

Prolific breeders, Florida wild hogs breed year round, with peaks in the breeding cycle during fall and spring. Sexually mature at 6 months, wild hogs typically do not breed until they are about a year old. Sows produce a “nest,” usually a shallow depression in the ground with or without vegetative nesting material, located in a shaded, upland site. Gestation is about 115 days. They can produce 2 litters of 1–13 (usually 5–7) piglets each year. Piglets remain in the nest for 3 weeks. Longevity for hogs is about 8 years.

Beware! It is important to know that hogs can carry viruses and diseases that can be transmitted to humans through their fecal matter and through touching the hogs themselves. If eaten and not properly cleaned or cooked correctly that can make you sick. They are aggressive if cornered or if you encounter a sow with babies. Males have long teeth called cutters (look like tusks) that are very sharp that they use to dig for roots and grubs but also use to protect themselves.

Introduced species are second only to habitat alteration in their negative effects on native species, habitats and whole ecosystems. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), more than 50 fish and wildlife nonnative species pose a threat to native species and human health and safety, as well as cause economic damage. Some animals, such as the wild pig, were brought here to serve as farm animals; some were brought in accidentally; some naturally expanded their territories; but most of the exotic residents in Florida are released pets and their offspring.

In some cases, it isn’t legal to own these nontraditional pets. Since 2008, certain wildlife species may not be kept and others require a permit. It is also illegal to release any nonnative species into the wild in Florida. Before adopting these animals as pets, consider the animal’s needs for shelter, food and social interaction for its entire life. Some exotic animals can live as long as its human caregiver. If your circumstances change, what will you do with the animal? While some people release animals into nature, it isn’t kind to either that animal or the native animals it might displace.

Exotic species are regulated at the state level by the FWC and nationally through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Controlling these invasive exotic species cost Floridians more than $500 million each year. Of this, $50 million is spent to eradicate exotic weeds. The ecological cost of damaging the environment is much greater. The Summer 2012 issue of Harbor Happenings introduced some of the most harmful of these invasive species.