



PHOTO BY LARRY MINDEN

Sonoma County's Fred Funk with Charlene, a large female feral pig that came to live at his ranch. Charlene is said to be "quite a pig," but many of her kin are receiving much less of a welcome from farmers and ranchers across the state.

HOG WILD

Wild or domestic? Game animal or pest?
The murky status of wild pigs is helping make them
a bigger nuisance to state farmers.

BY ERIC HOFFMAN

Wild hogs in California farm-lands are a phenomenon that has reached epidemic proportions. They can be found in Napa and Sonoma valleys, in pockets throughout the Sierra foothills, throughout the Santa Lucia and Mount Hamilton ranges, and in coastal areas all along the state. Believe it or not, sizable wild pig populations are now known in at least 30 of California's 58 counties, and their numbers and range are still expanding.

Although the pigs fare best among oaks and grasslands, they have adapted readily to every California habitat except deserts and mountains above the snow line. Just what this spread of wild pigs means to agriculture is hard to assess because there have been no statewide studies and only a few regional assessments. But judging from the available information—from state Department of Fish and Game biologists, game wardens, ranchers, and recognized wild pig experts—there's plenty of reason for concern. Pigs are now irrevocably altering the California landscape, affecting farming efforts in the process—and some people are deliberately helping them along.

Hunting statistics provide the best of the generally shaky figures on wild pig demographics. According to the most recent figures compiled by Fish and Game for 1984, at least 40,395 pigs were killed in state that year,

putting pigs on a par with deer as the state's most hunted big game animal. The 1984 figure represents a 45 percent increase over 1982 and a 150 percent increase over 1970. Unofficially, pigs may actually be far ahead of deer as the high-ranking big game animal in California because they are often hunted illegally by trespassing poachers and private property owners who don't report their kills. Furthermore, legal hunters are not required to purchase special tags in addition to hunting licenses, as they are required to do if hunting deer, so the state can't monitor the annual take.

Wild pigs are nothing new in California; historical accounts cite pockets of free-roaming porkers as far back as the Spanish period, and even more in the years following the California gold rush. But until recently wild pigs apparently never populated the state in such large numbers.

California's wild pigs descend from two varieties of *Sus scrofa*: free-roaming domestic pigs (also known as feral farm animals) and European wild boars. Not to be confused with the small native peccary of the Southwest, the wild pigs more and more commonly crashing through the underbrush in California are all introduced animals, usually of mixed heritage.

The pigs of one region, Monterey County, seem to have played an especially important role in the species' proliferation. In 1923, two dozen European wild boars—originally part of a population most likely from Germany—were captured at a pri-

vate preserve in North Carolina, transported across the continent, and released on the San Carlos Ranch in Carmel Valley. The wild boars were game animals, imported expressly for recreational hunting—but only by those who paid a fee. This kicked off the practice of using hunting to obtain a revenue from wild pigs, and the distinctive animals, with their protruding tusks, thick gray-and-brown coat, long snout, and straight bushy tail quickly became a popular game animal in California.

One way or another, free-roaming domestic hogs joined up with their long-legged, more mobile European cousins, and in time their unions produced ever-increasing numbers of boarish hybrids. It wasn't long before wild hybrids began popping up far from the Carmel Valley—and in areas to which it's unlikely they would've migrated on their own. Today, even though many wild populations in California still retain mainly domestic features, the statewide trend is toward a type in which the wild phenotype is dominant over the domestic.

Regardless of their appearance or genetic background, pigs in the wild are perhaps the most adaptable of all animals. It's no secret to anyone involved in raising livestock that pigs are omnivorous, opportunistic, broad-spectrum foragers that continually change their eating habits so that they can consume just about anything available.

Wild pigs survive by raiding barley fields, orchards, vineyards, and, in

some areas, row crops; by grazing like cattle in pastures; by munching acorns during the lean fall months (which directly affects deer, as they rely on acorns); and by gobbling down any small animals they come across, from rangeland-born domestic lambs to game bird eggs. Their numbers are controlled by drought, disease, and hunting, but their ability to replenish their numbers is phenomenal. With adequate nutrition, wild sows can breed at the tender age of six months and produce from four to 10 piglets twice a year. This characteristic has allowed them to withstand extremely heavy hunting. When UC-Berkeley professor Reg Barrett first studied population growth among wild pigs, he was astounded: "Viable pig populations can withstand as high as 70 percent annual hunting losses and still maintain a stable population. There's no other large animal with this ability."

Because of their reproductive powers, pigs can readily populate new areas. And where pigs have thus established themselves, pig hunting becomes a nonstop operation. Wild pigs are now the only big game animal that can be legally hunted year-round. Once a hunter buys a hunting license from Fish and Game, for just \$14 he can legally shoot one pig every day for a year.

In part, the spread of pigs from their original release sites is a consequence of the animals' intelligence and their willingness to seek new areas when food and water become scarce. In severe conditions—as when drought has diminished the acorn crop—pigs have been observed to travel 30 miles or more to colonize new territory. According to Martha Schauss, who earned a master's degree at San Jose State University studying wild pigs, they only go as far as they have to go: "Generally, they limit themselves to an area of a few square miles that always includes a source of water and food, with a strong preference for cover for hiding and avoiding the sun."

But above and beyond the pigs' ability to disperse themselves, pig-hunting interests have played a major role in methodically adjusting the animals' population growth rate, geographic range, and even genetic makeup. In some areas, as at the 35,000-acre Dye Creek Ranch near Red Bluff, pigs are culled in favor of the wild phenotype. The ranch is a fully legal hunting preserve—hunters pay for the right to shoot pigs—and its operation is carefully managed under guidelines that keep the pig population within desired levels and away from neighboring ranches. Ray Harden of southern Monterey County runs a similar operation sanctioned by Fish and Game, but on smaller acreage. Due to sound management practices, his operation doesn't af-

fect his neighbors.

Others are not so scrupulous. Direct and indirect evidence suggests that pigs have been deliberately transported throughout the state for the pleasure and financial gain of persons who have little regard for neighboring agricultural concerns or for natural habitats.

One Sonoma rancher visited by this reporter ran about 400 wild pigs on 350 acres. When someone desiring a young porker came to his ranch, he simply threw out grain and grabbed a semi-tame pig for his customer. If the customer was a hunter, the same farmer dispersed the pigs by chasing them with his truck, "to give the pigs a chance and give the hunter a challenge."

On both sides of his "pig operation" are crop farmers. Understandably, his relationship with the neighbors had degraded into something that sounded like the Hatfields and the McCoys. The pig farmer complained about the cantankerous nature of his neighbors, who "went and hired a lawyer to get after me just because pigs eat a few plants."

Although it is illegal to trap, transport, contain, sell, and release wild pigs without a special permit, ambiguities in the law make enforcement difficult. Part of the problem arises because pigs, unlike all other big game, have dual status. They are classified as both big game animals and as domestic farm animals. The law distinguishes between wild and domestic pigs solely by the presence or absence of man-made indications of ownership. Those pigs with "marking... or some permanent manner exhibiting dominion" are classified as domestic. Those without are wild. Thus, under the law, a rotund pink Yorkshire hog that slips out of a pen without an ear tag or skin brand is technically wild, while a 10th-generation, free-roaming European wild boar that has been captured illegally and then tagged becomes a domestic animal suddenly exempt from big game laws.

Despite the easy regulations, it's doubtful that many people even go to the trouble of tagging the wild boars they capture for sale, slaughter, or release. There's little need to play it safe because the law is rarely enforced. Wild boar phenotypes without marks are sold openly in public auctions in the Salinas area and to migrant labor camps in many places.

It's not that making arrests and getting convictions are impossible. Henry Coletto, the wildlife officer for Santa Clara County's regional parks, has at times arrested both poachers and property owners for containing unmarked wild pigs. And based on the absence of marks and the pigs' wild boar appearance, he has repeatedly obtained convictions of persons illegally containing wild game.

The most telling evidence of the illegal transplanting of wild pigs is the continuing spread of wild phenotypes to new sites around the state, far from the nearest established wild stock. And, corroborating the indirect evidence, many farmers and hunters will gladly explain the role they have played in developing "good pig hunting" in their areas. In some cases, just a few European boar hybrids released into an existing feral domes-

tic population have been enough to alter its overall appearance. In other areas, pigs were simply dumped off and allowed to establish themselves.

In the late 1970s, in the only study of its kind, Reg Barrett and Fish and Game biologist Don Pine attempted to analyze the dynamics of pig proliferation by studying the phenomenon in San Benito County. The county had undergone what appeared to be a rapid increase in wild pigs. Through questionnaires and interviews, Barrett and Pine found that the pig population had spread from occupying just 8 percent of the county's land to occupying 54 percent in 20 years.

About 50 percent of the ranchers surveyed felt pigs were pests, with no redeeming qualities, while about 40 percent judged them to be both pests and an asset. Six percent judged them entirely an asset.

It's not surprising that some ranchers have come to favor pigs. Fees for trophy-quality boars often bring \$400-1000, with the fee being split between the hunting guide (if one is desired) and the property owner. Still, some ranchers who don't want hunters on their property shoot every pig they see—a practice that's legal only if the rancher gets a special depredation permit.

And there are other conflicts. San Miguel cattle rancher and barley farmer Stanford White estimates his annual loss to pigs at \$20,000. He says also that "poaching has gotten much worse. I'd estimate one [poacher] in a hundred gets caught or run off. Often they've been drinking and are the kind of people that will shoot a calf if they can't find a pig. Or, if you get in their way, they might even settle for you." It's not uncommon in White's area for entire barns of alfalfa to be lost or damaged to pigs who undermine the bottom bales until the stack tumbles.

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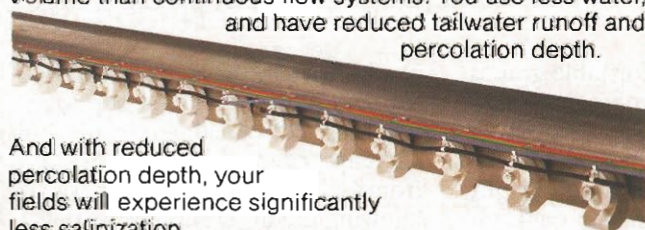
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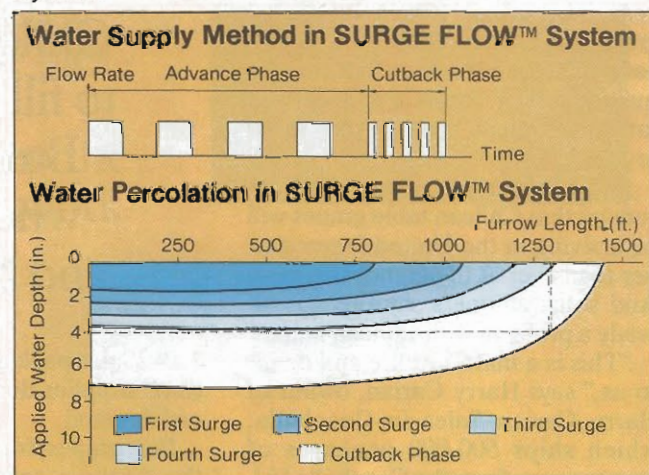


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WILD HOGS

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Responding to the sound of gunshots in the middle of the night, White once found himself confronted by five armed men. And though he doesn't admit to being easily intimidated, he explains, "It's unhealthy to continually be put in the position of dealing with armed people who are breaking the law. I've had to hold a gun on some of them for three hours before help arrived."

Fish and Game warden Ray Azbill, who works in southern Monterey County, arrests as many as 100 pig poachers a year and is sometimes amazed at what he comes across. "Some of them use police scanners to track our activities. Some wear army fatigues, blacken their faces, hunt with dogs, and kill the pigs with a knife or spear. When we've run checks on them, we often find they have records for everything including murder."

Wildlife officer Henry Coletto of Santa Clara County describes a blood cult of sorts that is attracted to pigs: "It's a game to them. They want to get in and out without leaving a trace. One night I caught two guys in a truck with a bunch of hunting dogs wearing thick leather vests. [The hunters] had a dead pig with a dozen stab wounds in its side. They explained that while the dogs occupied the pig, one of them jumped on its back, strad-

dled it, and stabbed it until its lungs gave out. Bizarre as it may seem, it's fairly common, and the people who do it see it as macho."

The resurgent popularity of pig hunting coincides with several related trends. The number of financially pressed farmers turning to wild pigs as an extra source of income has increased. Meanwhile, the number of people wanting to hunt big game in California has been steadily increasing, while the overall availability of game has been decreasing. Deer populations have declined statewide (in some areas due to pigs consuming acorns), and mountain lion, bighorn sheep, elk, and bear are either entirely or partially protected. As a result, the wild pig has become California's game animal of choice, and pig hunters come from as far away as New York and Texas. A small number of property owners make a profit. The question that nobody seems to be asking is, what does the spread of pigs mean for farmers who don't want them?

Within the patchwork of public and private properties that make up modern rural California, pigs are assured of enough refuges where hunting isn't allowed to rebuild their numbers. Some ranchers are caught in a vise. For obvious reasons they're reluctant to allow the public onto their lands to depress pig populations, while at the same time they can't cope with the problem them-

selves. As a result, the problem worsens and spills over onto still another ranch.

As concerns mount, so do the pressures on Fish and Game. Many observers now feel strongly that the private and public management practices, enforcement efforts, and laws relating to wild pigs are in need of reform.

Biologist Martha Schauss feels the law should start distinguishing between wild and domestic phenotypes to stem the trend toward the boarish type that hunters prefer. Schauss feels the wild phenotype should be considered strictly a game animal and subject to the same laws as deer and other wild game. Anyone caught transporting, releasing, or containing a wild boar, regardless of any mark, would be cited.

Rancher Stanford White also thinks changes in the law are necessary: "Chances are, hunting won't eliminate these pigs. They breed too fast and can always breed places hunters can't find them. Fish and Game should sponsor legislation that allows carefully monitored mass trappings during the fall when pigs congregate around water. The animals could be butchered and the meat used by prisons and public institutions. Presently, ranchers' hands are tied. We have to fight pigs because of unintelligent laws that don't allow efficient management, and we have to fight poachers because the law won't allow us to resolve the problem."

Fish and Game staff biologist Donald Koch sees a change in the attitude of some ranchers as the key. "I've seen barley fields with 100 or more pigs churning through them. Highly regulated hunting until the

problem is controlled is the best solution. Keeping hunters off doesn't remedy the problem."

Realistically, it's hard to say what changes in the laws will be made, and when. As things stand, Fish and Game benefits from the pigs in the collection of hunting license fees. A minority of property owners also benefit by charging fees for what is often a minimally financed and managed operation.

But the impetus for change is growing, and will undoubtedly bring pig hunting and agricultural interests into even more direct confrontation. Stuck in the middle will be Fish and Game. Henry Coletto sees proposals for uniform enforcement, with stiff new deterrents for offenders, as a big step in the right direction. "The same people are arrested over and over again," he says, "apparently because the fines don't negate the gain. But poaching is symptomatic of the bigger problem of people transporting, capturing, and selling wild pigs. The problem isn't being addressed."

The author is a writer living in Santa Cruz.

Small Farms Big Here

A new UC-Davis publication, *California Small Farm Profile*, indicates that 81 percent of California farms are still relatively small-scale enterprises, with sales of less than \$100,000 annually. These farms produce \$1 billion in sales annually and many of their commodities are not produced by large farms, according to the report. Most smaller farms are located in Fresno, San Diego, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tulare counties.

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