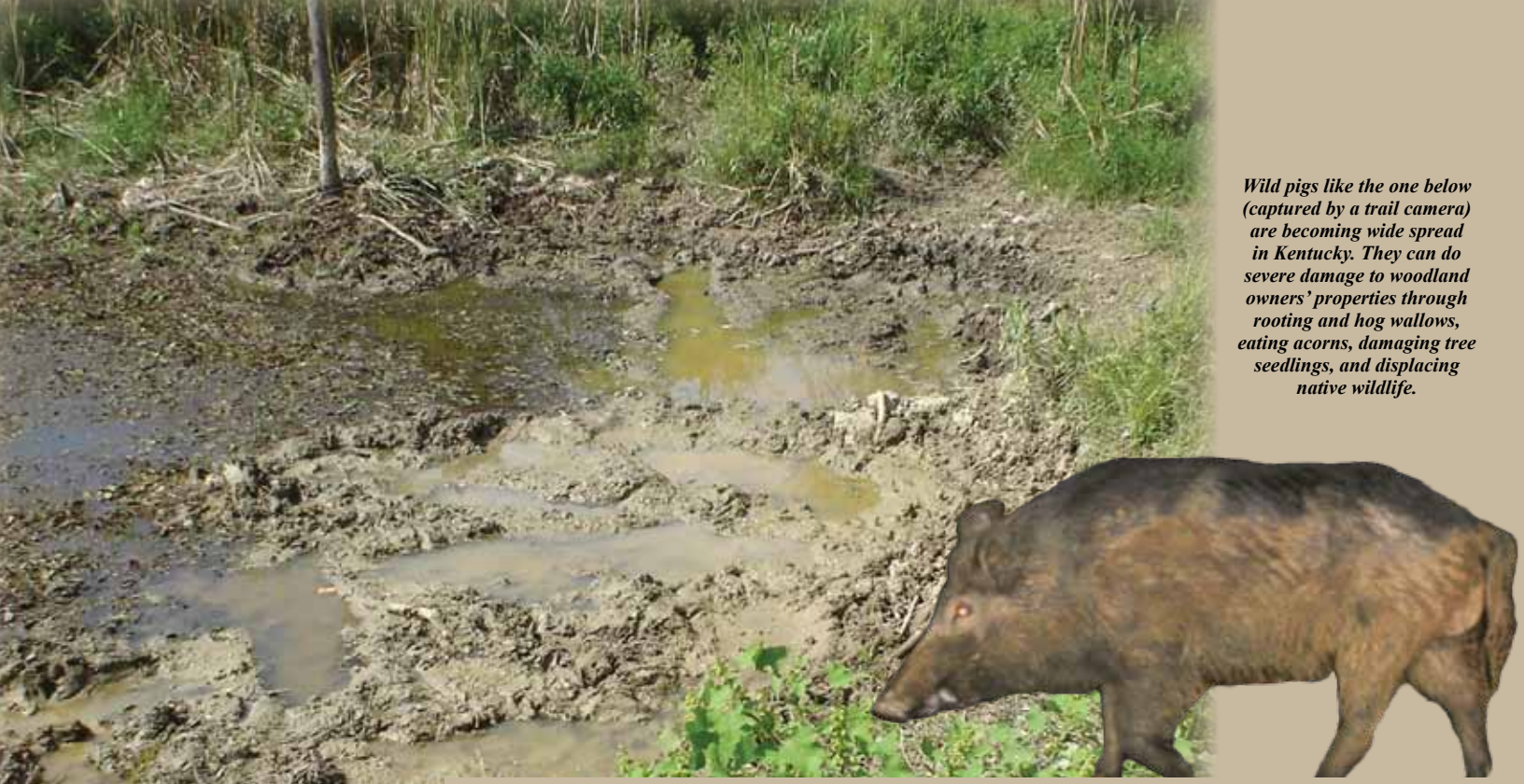


Wild pigs like the one below (captured by a trail camera) are becoming wide spread in Kentucky. They can do severe damage to woodland owners' properties through rooting and hog wallows, eating acorns, damaging tree seedlings, and displacing native wildlife.

Wild Pigs in Kentucky

by Chad Soard and Jason Nally

Photos courtesy: Chad Soard

Pigs have long been an element of rural life in Kentucky, though in recent years our favorite source for the "other white meat" has emerged as a new presence in our fields and forests. These free-ranging pigs have been given many names including razorbacks, rooters, and wild boar, but in truth they are little more than domestic pigs living independent of people. Correctly termed wild or feral pigs, this species is simply an exotic pest posing serious ecological, economical, and disease threats.

If you have lived or spent much time in more southeastern states you may be well acquainted with the ills of wild pigs. In fact, they have been present throughout much of the southeastern United States since the 1500s, descendants of domestic pigs accompanying early European explorers as livestock. Historic practices of allowing pigs to range freely and regular releases of pigs over the following centuries encouraged their spread. Moreover, in the first half of the 20th century Eurasian wild boar, the wild species from which pigs were domesticated, were imported on several occasions to hunting preserves. Subsequent escapes from preserves and purposeful releases of Eurasian wild boar over the following decades augmented local feral populations with which they freely interbred. Such interbreeding introduced "wild boar" physical characteristics into successive generations of wild pigs consistent with those regularly seen in modern populations. From the 1950s through the late 1970s additional movements and releases by private individuals and some state wildlife agencies further expanded the range of wild pigs in the southeast, establishing them as a popular game species in some states.

In Kentucky, it is illegal to possess, transport, or release wild pigs, and a sanctioned release has never occurred. Nevertheless, wild pigs have been present in the Cumberland Plateau region of Tennessee since the 1960s, and their dispersal into Kentucky was first documented in 1988. Public reports of wild pigs in Kentucky remained relatively uncommon until the 1990s when sporadic reports began to emerge from the Dale Hollow Lake area of Cumberland County and the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in McCreary County. Today, verified sightings and documented hunter kills have been confirmed in approximately one-third of Kentucky's counties. Clear disconnections between emerging wild pig populations have made it apparent that natural population expansion is not solely responsible. Rather, many of these populations have been created through illegal releases in an attempt by misguided individuals to create a recreational hunting opportunity.

Regrettably, the establishment of wild pig populations is not difficult and has now occurred across Kentucky and in at least 45 states. The remarkable adaptability of this species has aided its spread across diverse habitats and climatic conditions. Compound this adaptability with an incredible reproductive potential, and the problem is clear. Sows are capable of having two litters of greater than 10 piglets per year, and reproduction is not seasonally bound. In addition, juvenile pigs reach reproductive maturity by only 6 to 10

months of age. Population growth can be explosive, and damage associated with pigs will increase simultaneously.

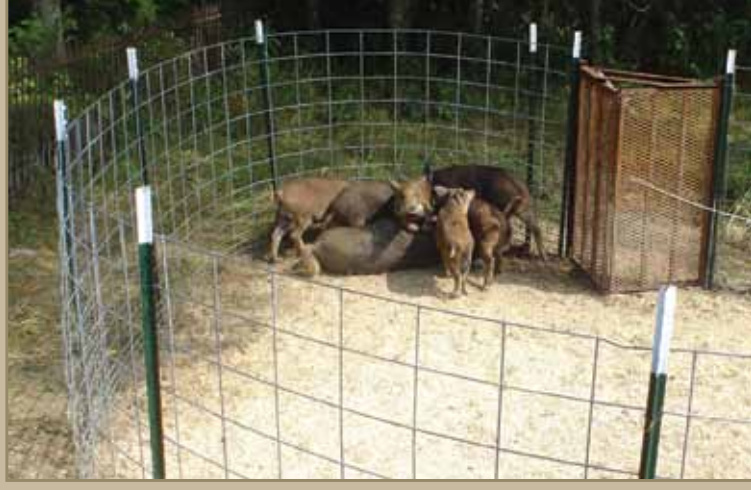
Most Kentuckians are fortunate enough to have never seen or experienced wild pig damage, although the threats posed by this exotic pest should concern us all. In parts of the Commonwealth farmers are experiencing crop depredation with reported losses in the tens of thousands of dollars; losses can be expected to increase as wild pig numbers grow. In addition, wild pigs are one of the most active carriers of wildlife-related disease, and at least 45 parasites and diseases transmissible to livestock, pets, wildlife, and people have been identified. All threats posed by wild pigs are equally alarming, but it may be the ecological damage that hits closest to home for those of us who manage the land for wildlife or timber.

Ecological damage related to wild pigs occurs both in the short and long term. Most conspicuous is the disruption to the ground and soil processes from pig rooting and wallowing behaviors. The voracious appetite of pigs has farther reaching impacts. Acorns and other hardwood mast represent a major food source for wild pigs; forest regeneration can be significantly altered in areas of high pig abundance as they may leave few seeds to germinate. Even tree seedlings are not safe from pigs and may be uprooted, trampled, and in some cases consumed. Sensitive or imperiled plant communities are particularly threatened by rooting, wallowing, and trampling activities often resulting in irreversible damage. Faunal communities also suffer as native wildlife is often displaced by wild pigs through competition for food and space. Moreover, wild pigs are relatively indifferent in their forage selection and will consume most any available invertebrate or vertebrate prey including reptiles, amphibians, ground-nesting bird eggs, and even deer fawns. Abundant other ecological stressors related to wild pigs could be cited; though illustrating the significance of the threat takes very few.

Relative to other states wild pig numbers in Kentucky remain low, and properly implemented control is effective. Although rooting is the most recognizable sign that pigs are frequenting your property, several other tell-tale signs may be left by wild pigs. Tracks, rubs, hog wallows, droppings, beds, and trails may also be present if pigs are using your property. Look for these signs to determine the travel routes that pigs are using to access your property. Concentrating control efforts along these routes can significantly increase the success of your eradication efforts.

This group of wild pigs was spotted by a trail camera. Although, hunting wild pigs may seem like a good option it often results in the pigs moving to a neighboring property or only coming out at night—the better option is to trap them.

The allure of hunting wild pigs has been one of the main factors in the spread of their populations, but hunting has been proven time and again to be ineffective in eliminating wild pig problems. Experience shows that when pigs are hunted they will do one of two things: become nocturnal or leave the property. This response to hunting is not beneficial to you or neighboring landowners. If you regularly see a lone pig on your property it is effective to shoot the animal, but if you are seeing multiple pigs your best strategy is to establish



Corral traps like the one above have proven to be a successful strategy for controlling wild pig populations. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources provide woodland owners with technical and cost-share assistance for dealing with wild pigs on their property. See the links at the end of this article for more information.

corral traps around areas of abundant pig sign and intensively trap those animals. Hunting can then be used as an effective method in removing trap shy animals that remain in the area after you have exhausted your trapping efforts. Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources private lands wildlife biologists are available to help you develop a management plan for trapping pigs on your property. Although trapping wild pigs can become expensive, the cost is far less than the economic impact of not controlling wild pig populations. Cost-share assistance is also available through the KDFWR Habitat Improvement Program. If you would like to learn more about trapping wild pigs or applying for cost-share assistance, please contact KDFWR headquarters at 1.800.858.1549, or visit our website.

Useful links for starting to develop a wild pig management plan.

http://fw.ky.gov/navigation.aspx?cid=976&navpath=C741C921

http://fw.ky.gov/app2/navigation.aspx?cid=975&navpath=c741c753c921

http://fw.ky.gov/kfwis/viewable/privatelands_biologists.pdf

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