

Signs Of The Beast

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Introducing True Boar And Wild Pigs

True wild boar are the ancestors of our modern pigs. They are members of the family of Suidae, genus Sus, species Scrofa. There are 11 subspecies. Fortunately, they all look like pigs – sort of.

Boar originally ranged from the Atlas Mountains in North Africa across most of Central Europe and over much of Asia all the way to Indonesia. Domesticated pigs were later introduced to many other parts of the world by explorers, adventurers and settlers as a convenient source of food. Today wild pigs are found on all continents, except the arctic and antarctic, and on many islands. Wild boar do not occur in extremely dry deserts and in alpine climates. Because of their wide and diverse range true boar come under many names, Eurasian boar, Russian, Polish, French, German, Italian boar, razorbacks, Captain Cookers (though the latter are not true boar) and many, many more local names...

Boar were feared, revered and hunted as early as the Bronze Age as evidenced by an Iron age statue of a bronze boar from that time...

Boar abound in mythology. Celtic, Norse, Persian, Hindu, Greek, Chinese and many other religious

mythologies have gods that either have their private boar or can transform into the form of a boar. Vishnu's third avatar (incarnation) was a boar. The Norse goddess Freya rode into battle on a boar called "Battle Swine" (Hildeswini) if she did not ride around in her cat-drawn chariot.

Boars are also frequently used in heraldry. Many kings, noble families and cities used the boar as a charge in their coat of arms. Boars acquired this distinction because of their fierceness in battle and for their courage...

Wild pigs in America

The first domestic pigs came with Columbus in 1493 to the West Indies. They were introduced to the continental United States around 1593.

The Spanish released the first domestic pigs in 1769 in California. It did not take long for many of the domestic pigs to become feral...

Domestic pigs become feral very easily, reverting back to their wild boar origins.

In the process, feral domestic pigs begin to resemble more their wild ancestors than domestic pigs.

They also adapt very well to diverse environmental conditions where they thrive under most conditions as long as a few basic requirements are met – water, food and safe shelter...

Wild pigs live in small groups, called sounders, that consist mainly of breeding sows and their offspring. Male pigs are generally not part of such a group except during the height of the breeding season in fall. At that time normally solitary boars move into female groups. They fight for dominance by circling each other, pushing and showing for position and slashing with their tusks.

Female wild pigs produce larger litters than true wild boar sows. Wild pig litters average 5 – 7 piglets (more under good conditions) while wild boar litters usually do not exceed 4 to 6 piglets. The average litter size of American wild pigs was recorded in 1990 by Peine and Farmer at 4.36 piglets. Wild pig sows can breed all year round... Male wild pigs are also capable of breeding all year without a special rutting season. But the peak of breeding occurs in October and November possibly because of decreasing day length. Birth of piglets (parturition) peaks between March and July; there is a smaller peak around November/December . . .

Habitat, Habits, Diet

Habitat

Wild pigs, true to their hybrid background, are not only very varied in color, body shape and size, but also occupy a wide range of diverse habitats.

They are at home in wet marshlands, in woodlands, in mountainous regions and everywhere else in between. Wild pigs are very fond of moist forests, shrubby areas, tall grasslands, reeds and other moist areas with high undergrowth to hide in.

When their basic requirements of water, shelter and food are met, wild pigs can adapt to almost any environment. True wild Eurasian boars can handle and survive harsh and cold winters.

They are able to tolerate cold winters because of a heavy woolly undercoat that protects them from the cold and wetness. . . .

And as long as boar can find water, they will also thrive in hot and dry conditions. Water is essential to their survival because pigs do not have sweat glands and therefore need external means of cooling their body...

The ideal wild pig habitat is forests or woodlands with a mix of trees bordering on or surrounding more open, grassy terrain. They prefer deciduous woods over coniferous stands.

A forest comprised of mast bearing trees, such as oak, chestnut, hazelnut, hickory, beech and any other tree producing mast, is ideal for the wild boar since they feast on mast in fall and at the beginning of winter. ..

Wild boar also thrive in coastal swamps, brackish marshlands and in riparian areas where they find ample cover in areas covered by thick vegetation, shrubs and plenty of food. Thick vegetation, shrubs, bushes, brambles, thickets of all kinds interspersed with clearings, close to water are all on the wish list of wild boar. Wild pigs mix freely with livestock grazing on meadows or pastures. They will move on to safer areas after feeding . . .

Habits

There is another component to the great success of wild pigs: Their ability to adapt their habits readily to changing conditions and to evolving habitats.

The basic survival unit of wild boar has not changed: The extended family unit. Wild boar and wild pigs live in small social groups that are comprised of an inner circle of two or three breeding sows and their most recent litter. Next to this core group are sexually maturing females and sometimes the young (male and female) of those females. On the fringes of the group are younger, sexually immature or maturing boar. Most social groups, called sounders, have between 6 and 30 or more animals. But smaller groups are more common. Mature males do not normally live within the social group of females and their young. ..

Each sounder has a range, a wide area in which the group moves during daily activities and a core range within that range. The range of different family groups can overlap. They are overlapping more in winter. However, core ranges of individual family groups do not overlap. Male ranges do overlap female core areas. A core area is defined as the area that contains feeding, resting, wallowing and bedding spots frequented by only one sounder.

The size of a family's range is determined most by available water and food resources, safe resting and nesting areas. Additional factors are habitat disturbance by human activities and predation.

Family groups deliberately move through their range following seasonal food sources. They tend to use areas for several weeks, leave the area and return a year later when seasonal food sources become available again. ..

Within this greater circular recurring movement are daily patterns of range use.

This daily routine revolves around a wild pig's most important need: Water. ..

Wild pigs and boar are mainly nocturnal. Their period of greatest activity usually starts around sunset and ceases around sunrise. They are likely to be almost exclusively nocturnal in areas of high human activities ...

Wild pigs frequent open areas almost exclusively during the night... Exceptions can occur during prolonged light rainfall or after a heavy rain storm combined with foggy conditions. Under those conditions boar may forage out in the open even during the day...

In addition to the factors outlined above there are also other events that influence the daily routine of wild pigs. Among them are sudden changes in weather (thunderstorms and prolonged rain), extreme cold and an acute shortage of food...

Food shortages are the strongest incentive for wild pigs to come out into the open in search of food even during the day. Lack of their 'natural' food can also drive them to raid agricultural crops and farmlands in a desperate search of food sources...

Diet

A hunter should know what food his quarry consumes during the hunting season. What wild boar eat, tells you where you can find them.

Fresh wild pig scats are your best source of information. Old scats will only tell you what and where they were eating last week.

Wild pigs root for tubers and other subterranean food, hunters in turn dig around in boar scats!

Wild pigs are opportunistic omnivores. They eat everything and anything of nutritional value: Roots, grasses, fruits, berries, shoots, seeds, nuts, tubers, acorns, any mast, agricultural crops, carrion, eggs (ground nesting birds and chicken), birds, earthworms, insects, amphibians, reptiles, rodents, invertebrates and vertebrates, carrion and anything else in between.

Studies of stomach contents of wild pigs showed that at least 90 percent of a wild pig's diet is vegetation. Estimates range from a low of 80 to 95 or more percent. . . .

Falling acorn attract large groups of wild pigs to oak forests for a feeding frenzy before winter. During this period boar stay close to their prime food source. They do not move around much.

In years of poor mast, wild pigs will concentrate on subterranean plants, invertebrates, agricultural crops and – please do not overlook it – the open trash dump of rural communities...

When their natural food is scarce, wild boar use agricultural crops to augment their diet. Wild pigs are particularly fond of potatoes, maize, turnips and barley. Raids on these and other agricultural crops bring them in conflict with man. And so does their rooting...

Signs of the Beast

Wild pigs leave signs of their presence behind wherever they go.

But before delving head first into signs let me point out the single most overlooked fact in pig hunting:

All wild boar signs show the past, not the presence unless you are fortunate enough to catch wild pigs in the act of leaving signs while feeding, traveling, relaxing in a mud wallow or in their bedding areas.

Signs will only tell you that wild pigs were there some time ago. They will not necessarily tell you exactly how long ago; where the pigs went from there, for how long and whether they will return or not.

It takes much knowledge about the nature of pigs and very careful observation of the signs, the surrounding areas and the weather to come to reasonable conclusions. But you can never be certain that your conclusions and interpretation of the signs are reliable and correct.

Take for example rooting in moist ground. You determine it was done last night and the wild boar were after young shoots or some buried acorn. You conclude that since rooting in moist soil was so easy and effective, they will be back to finish the job. You wait for hours and hours on end without any success. No wild pigs anywhere.

Same scenario. You notice tracks of several wild boar all leading in the same direction – away from the rooting. Aha, they are moving on to better feeding, you conclude. You conclude that the pigs will not come back. Since feeding pigs move at about 1 mile per hour, you start walking along the tracks – which you promptly lose sooner or later. No wild pigs anywhere.

You give up. The next morning you pass by the 'old' rooting site and, alas, there is absolutely fresh rooting right where you stood the day before! . . .

The more you learn about wild pigs, the more boar signs you find and interpret, the sharper your tracking skills will become. This increases your chances of finding wild boar exponentially...

Wild Pig Rooting

Wild boar signs come in several incarnations, e.g. visual, auditory and olfactory. The most obvious are the visual signs.

Rooting is the easiest to spot. You walk an area looking for pigs. Suddenly on the side of the dirt road or on an open spot next to dense cover you notice the earth disturbed, torn up, tossed end over end, plowed over and under.

Most boar hunters react with the same urgency: Duck immediately into cover, get the rifle ready and loaded, settle down right then and there for an ambush. Surely the wild boar will come out of their cover any second now to continue rooting. Where there is so much rooting, there have to be wild boar living nearby, you think. They are just resting in their beds in dense cover. They will be back shortly to continue feeding. It's only a matter of minutes, maybe an hour? You tell yourself.

Correct?

Wrong.

You could be sitting there all day long without ever seeing a wild pig return! Boar primarily feed at night, not during the day. They also move around in patterns in search of food and water...

Finding and looking at boar rooting is a window into the past. Examine it anyway. Is the earth in the uprooted areas still moist? How about the plant roots? Still kind of moist? Roots and rooting areas dry and dusty?

Does the rooting show a directional pattern or is it completely random? Can you make out the direction of the rooting? What is the size of the rooted area? And where is the rooting located? Close to cover, under trees or out in the open?

An honest answer to the above questions will give you something to work with. For example, if the rooting is fresh and under or around oak trees during fall season, chances are good that the boar will return to the area during one of the following nights. ..

Tracks, Trails, Tunnels

Tracks

Where there is rooting, there are tracks. Wild pig tracks. Problem is other critters also leave tracks behind. Mainly deer and calves, when free ranging cattle are around.

To complicate matters further, all of them are ungulate and artiodactyla, hooved animals with cloven hoofs (with even shaped front toes). For the hunter this simply means that at times it is somewhat difficult to tell which of them left the tracks.

Deer tracks are easiest to eliminate because of their size. They also are more triangular in shape and pointed at the front. In addition, the toes are close together. Weight and impact can, however, spread the toes out a little. . . .

This applies particularly to the front feet. Look at the clear footprint of a wild pig taking a leisurely stroll. Note the well rounded hoof tips. The toes are not spread. The dewclaws left no impression in the ground...

The wild pig tracks below show very clearly the distinctive round toes of a wild pig hoof. Note how the hoof halves are gently curving towards the front and the back of the hoof. The separation between the two toes becomes wider towards the front of the hoof. This serves as an important distinction between wild pig tracks and the footprint of a small calf.

In areas where wild boar and cattle freely mingle, the footprint of a small calf could be mistaken for a pig track. ..

Trails

Rooting, wild pig tracks and boar trails go together. If you find one of the three, there is a very good chance that you will find the others not too far away. Let's put it all in context. Boar are creatures of habit. Strong habits. We know that wild pigs follow a daily routine of feeding, travel to and from a core area and resting. The daily routine is subject to seasonal changes. A stable wild boar population follows its seasonal and daily routines in an almost predictable pattern...

Tunnels

The tunnel entrance looks very much like the holes made by wild pigs in a wire fence. If you look at it in low light conditions, the low arched entrance is clearly reminiscent of the entrance to a railroad

tunnel or a black small door. Behind the entrance often lies a trail systems that runs sometimes within a few yards inside the dense thicket and even parallels the border of the cover. It may lead to the open again at another tunnel entrance/exit. ..

Beds, Scats and Rubs

These are the last major signs of wild pigs to talk about – in alphabetical order and coincidentally also in order of significance.

Let us therefore discuss them in reverse order, allowing for a sustained crescendo; ending fortissimo on a high note belted out by the fat lady, or should I better say by the fat pig, “I could have slept tonight, I could have slept tonight . . . ”.

Rubs

Just like rooting, rubs are hard to overlook when you come face to face with one. Expect to find them close to mud wallows and mud beds of wild boar. If you stumbled upon them accidentally, it shows that wild boar are active in this general area and, when you are tracking wild pigs, rubs confirm that you are on the right track...

Scats

Come in many sizes, shapes and forms. They also come under many names: Manure, dung, droppings, feces, to name a few. But most important for the wild boar hunter is whether they are cold scat or warm droppings.

Warm wild pig feces put a hunter on high alert. The quarry has to be close by and most likely is also feeding! It is time to stop and listen.

Feeding wild boar are quite noisy. Can you hear anything? Feeding wild pigs often communicate loudly with grunts, squeals and squeaks...

A little dung digging can tell you what the boar was eating. Together with your knowledge of the area you get an idea of the location of the feeding grounds of the wild pigs. ..

Beds

Wild pigs love to live it up to the fullest – eating, digging, wallowing, swimming, making more pigs, fighting. They do it noisily and with great dedication.

All this pigging out drives them inexorably towards their bedding areas at the end of the night. Bedding sites are located in the core area, the safe area, of a wild pig family group. They start their 'day' from there and return to them again at the end of the 'day'.

Bedding is generally located in well protected areas within the thickest brush, bushes and brambles...

Though bedding areas are one of the best places to acquire your target, they are also the most dangerous to approach and to disturb. Interrupt as little as possible and conceal your visit or presence well. If you spook the wild pigs in their safe bedding area, you might as well pack up your hunting gear, go home and wait for a better day in the future. The boar will not return soon to the bedding area you disturbed.

One overeager, clumsy hunter can ruin everyone's day for good...

Summing Up Pig Hunting Facts

Each of the previous chapters covered one or more important aspects of wild boar and wild pig hunting.

All have a practical application in locating boar, recognizing their presence by the signs they leave behind and in how to hunt wild pigs...