Hunters become part of an aggressive effort to root out escaped pigs in Illinois.

Who Let the Hogs Out?

Story By Joe McFarland

(Photo courtesy Missouri Department of Conservation.)

The destructive, rooting habits of feral hogs in America's wild lands cause widespread damage. It's why resource managers target these non-native mammals for removal.

For many, the mere mention of bacon is all that's needed to justify the existence of pigs anywhere in America. So why are so many state wildlife managers trying to eradicate every last pig that roams wild on public lands?

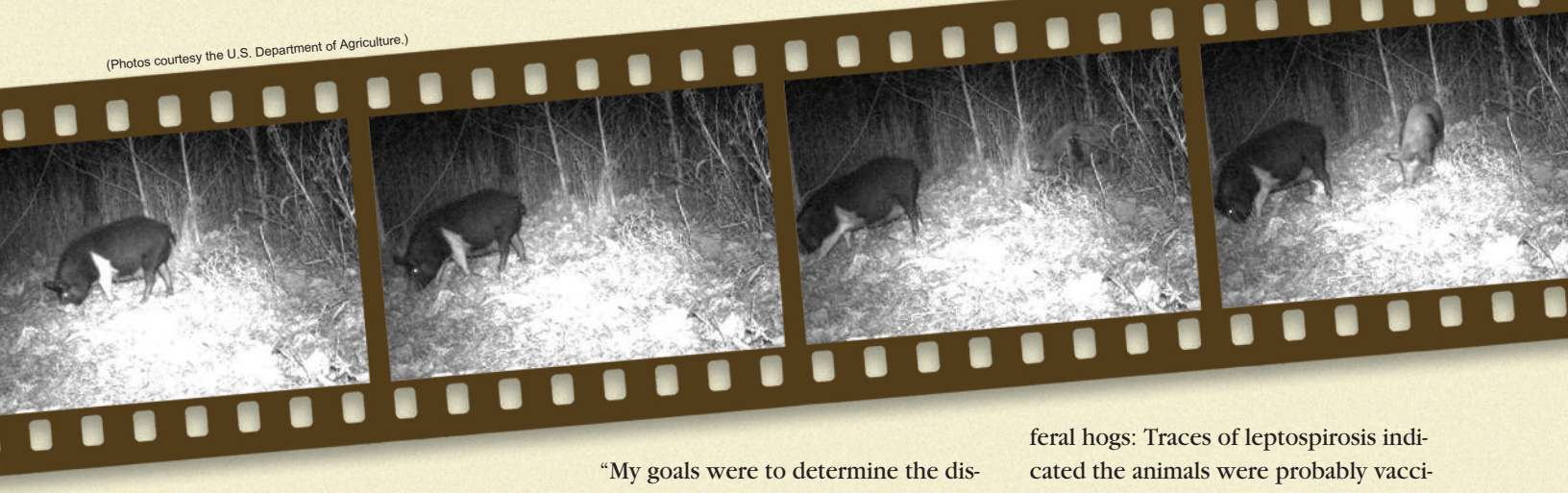
It's not just for their bacon. Those so-called "wild" hogs, it turns out, really aren't so wild after all. What's more, as non-native invaders in America's national forests and state parks, pigs are wreaking ecological havoc. At places like the Great Smoky Mountains—and throughout many Gulf Coast states and even Hawaii—the destruction of imperiled habitats is being blamed directly on the indulgences of wayward pigs.

Here's a surprising fact: All "wild" hogs in America are merely descendants of hogs that were introduced to this country long ago. Even the gruff-looking "wild boars" aren't native to America. Those mascot-famous Arkansas Razorbacks? Descendants of pigs from overseas.

The story begins centuries ago. Early settlers to North America brought along livestock pigs, a few of which escaped to establish feral populations. As the American frontier was settled and wild game was often plundered, imported Eurasian wild boars arrived in America for the purpose of supplementing hunting opportunities. And while the "wild boars" of many southern states today sometimes resemble their Eurasian ancestors, generations of interbreeding with escaped or released hogs from livestock farms have mixed the gene pool to the extent some "wild hogs" appear perfectly domestic.

"All wild pigs in North America are part domestic, with at least some domestic blood in them," explained Department of Natural Resources wildlife biologist Dan Woolard, who began noticing damages inflicted by *Sus scrofa* in the mid-1990s in southern Illinois. At that time, the public also began to report sightings of wild or "feral" hogs in a few counties in deep southern Illinois. Woolard and other wildlife officials documented the tell-tale evidence of their rooting and wallowing activities at state-managed habitats in Union County Con-

(Photos courtesy the U.S. Department of Agriculture.)



Often active at night, escaped or feral pigs can roam without being noticed. These escaped pigs were detected by a trail camera in southern Illinois.

servation Area, Trail of Tears State Forest and along the Cache River.

Since feral hogs had not been known to occur in Illinois, an intentional or accidental release of these animals was strongly suspected. But why would anyone intentionally release feral hogs? Despite the devastation inflicted by this non-native animal, some individuals still promoted their release into the wild for the same reasons Eurasian boars were introduced in the 1800s: exotic hunting opportunities.

Resource managers oppose any such introductions, and acted quickly to eradicate this new threat to Illinois. Not only were feral hogs voracious omnivores, pigging out on everything from roots and acorns to wildlife eggs, unknown diseases transmitted to livestock posed an ominous risk. Plus, wild hogs were known to kill young livestock and vulnerable wildlife—including white-tailed deer fawns. As their common epithet suggests, a pig can eat a lot, with certain adults topping the scales at more than 300 pounds.

A survey was ordered to reveal the extent of the problem. Beginning in 2001, DNR partnered with the zoology department at Southern Illinois University where a graduate student named Blake McCann was eager to study these new arrivals on the Illinois landscape. McCann's prior experience as a sharpshooting hog hunter on federal lands made him a natural candidate to investigate the status of Illinois' new invader.

"My goals were to determine the distribution of feral hogs in Illinois, the habitat they were using, as well as (physical characteristics) and whether or not they were carrying diseases," McCann said.

After two years of scouting reported sites, setting traps, interviewing hunters and spending long nights afield, McCann presented his 2003 thesis: "The Feral Hog in Illinois," documenting the incidence of 51 wild hogs in seven Illinois counties, most of them in deep southern Illinois. In Fulton County (central Illiois), escaped or released feral hogs had been documented for decades. Some hogs were imported Eurasian hogs, a few were escapees from livestock operations, and some were "hybrids."

One of those hogs—a 300-plus pound brute from Union County—was killed after biologist Woolard spotted evidence of hogs while flying his weekly, low-altitude waterfowl surveys in February 2002.

"We saw evidence of rooting in a wheat field while flying over Union County Conservation Area," Woolard recalled. "When I got off the plane, I called Blake and FAXed him a map of where I saw the hog. The next morning, he went out to the spot, and, as he was hiking in, he jumped the hog—then shot it. We haven't seen evidence of pigs on the site since."

Cooperation from the hunting public also increased success. Word quickly spread among hunters about the unwanted hogs and the declaration of an "open season." Southern Illinois hunters began providing sightings—as well as carcasses. Whenever possible, McCann would take blood samples and weights and measurements. A surprising find in the blood of two Eurasian feral hogs: Traces of leptospirosis indicated the animals were probably vaccinated before being released. But these weren't ordinary livestock. Based on the physical attributes of the majority of feral hogs he encountered, McCann concluded the rash of 1990s sightings were due to illegal releases of captive-reared Eurasian hogs.

"The low number of domestic hogs (11.6 percent) indicates that animals I collected were not from commercial hog farms," McCann wrote. "The presence of feral hogs (18.6 percent), hybrids (13.9 percent) and Eurasian wild boar (9.3 percent) is further evidence of the importation and release of hogs in Illinois."

As of 2008, efforts to eradicate feral hogs in Illinois have met with good success. Sightings are increasingly rare. Meanwhile, anyone who spots a wild hog is encouraged to complete an Unusual Wildlife Sightings report on the Living with Wildlife Web site at http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/wildlife.

With assistance from DNR, wildlife student Blake McCann studied feral hogs in Illinois for his 2003 SIU master's thesis.

(Photo courtesy SIU Dept. of Zoology.)