

by JIM HEFFELFINGER

JAVELINA: THE PIG THAT'S NOT A PIG

Javelina have always drawn a certain amount of curiosity because of their unique history and physical features. They are one of the most maligned and underappreciated big game animals in North America. Even the Boone and Crockett Club does not have a records category for these wonderful desert pigs. Perhaps they suffer from a lack of marketing for there is no national conservation organization named Peccaries Unlimited (PU?) fighting for their conservation and auctioning hunting permits for tens of thousands of dollars. Regardless, this species has an important, but short, history in North America.

DON'T CALL ME A PIG!

Contrary to the perpetual myth, javelina are not members of the rodent family, nor are they actually members of the pig family. They have characteristics that are unique enough to be placed in a separate family (Tayassuidae) that is closely related to the pig family (Suidae). The javelina is also known as the collared peccary, named for the white band or collar that runs across the shoulders. It occupies the peccary family with two other species: the white-lipped and the Chacoan peccary.

Javelina is not its official name, but is derived from the Spanish word "Jabali," thought to refer to the sharp tusks like the javalin thrown in the Olympic games. Other local names are common and varied across their range. In Texas, they are usually not referred to as "pigs" because we have feral hogs, but in the mostly pigless Arizona, they are frequently, and affectionately, called pigs.

Javelina differ from the real pig family in several important ways. The most obvious is the scent gland that both sexes have about six inches above the tail on the lower back. This

gland is filled with odiferous (some might say nasty) liquid secretions that are used to mark their territory by rubbing the scent on rocks and trees. This scent gland also probably serves to identify individuals to other herd members; there is much we don't know about scent communication in this and many other species.

Besides the scent gland, javelina differ from pigs because they do not have a tail that is easily visible, they have three toes on the hind foot rather than four in the feral hog, only

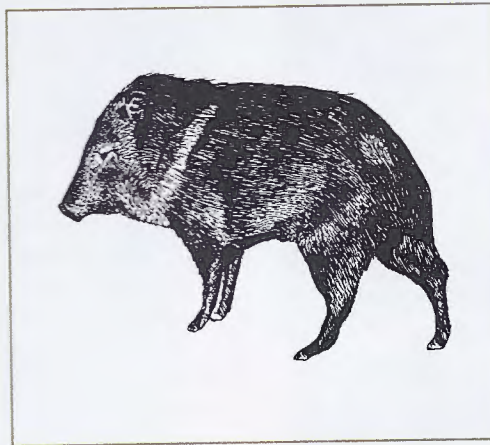
38 teeth, a more complex stomach, no gallbladder, and a few other minor differences from feral hogs. Most of these differences are not that important to most people who look at a javelina and think: "It looks like a pig, smells like a pig and sounds like a pig."

AMERICA'S PIG

Javelina (and all peccaries) are 100% America. While the real pig family evolved in Europe and was first imported to the Americas on a ship commanded by none other than Christopher Columbus in 1493. In contrast, the peccaries evolved in

Central and South America and spread northward into North America. This northward spread occurred on the Pacific coast and into Arizona and part of New Mexico and also on the Atlantic coast into Texas with these two arms of distribution joining in Central Mexico. Currently, javelina occur in southern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico and the southwestern one-third of Texas. Javelina in Texas and Arizona are considered different subspecies because they have been separated for so long and both are larger than specimens farther south in Mexico.

Although the journals of early explorers in the 1800s are sparsely sprinkled with reports of "Mexican hogs" and



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“Jabali” along the rivers and lowland valleys of the Southwest, these critters were relative newcomers to the United States. Archeological remains around Native American habitations prior to 1700 show no evidence of javelina. The first European settlers in the Southwest were probably documenting a relative newcomer that just barely beat them there. They have since continued a northward invasion even into the Ponderosa pine country near Flagstaff in northern Arizona. In these northern areas with snow for periods of time in the winter, javelina persist by finding shelter from the cold – sometimes under a heated porch. It is not uncommon for these javelina to have damaged ears from freezing in the winter.

SMELLS LIKE A PIG

Javelina do indeed smell like a pig, both as recipients and givers of smells. The scent gland gives off a strong odor that can be detected for a long time after javelina pass through an area. Also, their sense of smell is very good. This is the main sense that hunters have to defeat when stalking a javelina (outside of South Texas, people actually do that).

Their eyesight, however, is poor. They have small eyes that are not very adept at seeing objects far away. Since javelina evolved in the thick thorn scrub of Central America, they



PHOTO BY JIM HEFFELINGER

After periods of rainfall, much of their diet is forbs (weeds) that respond to the moisture and are easily rooted out. These provide important nutrients like vitamins and minerals.

The famous self-sharpening canines look like something that might be used to deliver the killing bite to a horse, but they are actually used to process vegetation. When habituated to humans (which they do readily), they are unpredictable and will literally bite the hand that feeds them. When a javelina bites with the over-lapping canine teeth, it creates a single wound channel through whatever extremity they felt like biting at the time. They seem to have no shortage of bacteria in their mouth and so infection is a real concern. I have heard of Emergency Room doctors running a small bottle brush through the wound channel to try to clean out most of the bacteria. Consider that next time you feel the urge to hand feed one of these likeable creatures.

BIOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

Our collared peccaries weigh 40-60 pounds on the hoof and live 7-10 years in the wild. One would think such a stench would relegate you to living a life in solitary, but they find safety in numbers and live in large groups, or herds, of 7-15. Some are smaller and some larger, but the reports of 50 javelina in a herd are never substantiated. Herds occupy territories ranging in size from 200-900 acres in South Texas and larger as you move west to the arid habitat. In Arizona, they have territories of 600-1,300 acres because they need more space to roam and find the food, water and shelter



PHOTO BY GEORGE ANDREIKO AZGFD

Prickly pear pads are the year-round staple food item for javelina; find areas with a high density of prickly pear and you will surely find javelina.

never needed to see much farther than 75 yards. Their sense of smell is their main defense, supplemented by average or below average hearing. When they do sense danger they do not delay in getting away and are surprising fast for the short-legged little porkers they are. The “attacks” we sometimes hear about in the wild are probably javelina trying to get away, but with their poor eyesight, just don't know which direction “away” actually is.

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needed to sustain themselves. These territories are defended against intrusion by other javelina and dangerous fights do occur. In good javelina habitat, each territorial boundary abuts the boundary of adjacent herds, but they sometimes call a truce and agree to share a common watering source. They reach their highest densities in areas where prickly pear cactus is dense and more than 50% brush canopy cover remains. As herds increase in size they may get so large they fragment into two smaller herds or simply increase the dispersal of individuals to other nearby herds.



Javelina eat pincushion cacti of all kinds by pawing over the cactus with their hooves and then eating the fleshy parts from the inside out.



Cholla is a nasty plant to deal with, but javelina make good use of the vitamins and nutrients in the fruits that hang on the end of the branches.

When feeding, javelina concentrate heavily on succulents such as prickly pear, hedgehog, pin cushion cactus and lechuguilla. The fruits and fleshy parts provide not only nutritious feed, but water as well. When javelina feed on prickly pear pads they grasp the pad and pull, which shreds the pad and leaves the stringy interior fibers visible. Small cacti such as Hedgehogs are knocked over with a front hoof and the insides are eaten out so that only the tough outer skin and spines remain. Lechuguilla leaves are pulled apart and left scattered as the javelina eats the fleshy heart out of the plant. Roots and tubers are also dug or "rooted" up by javelina in search of nutrition. Even though they are commonly referred to as omnivores, insects and animal flesh make of a very small part of their diet.

Javelina spend almost all their time resting and feeding. Resting occurs primarily in traditional bedgrounds, which are located in low areas of thick brush or caves throughout their territory. Bedgrounds offer soft soil to lie on and protection from predators and the weather. If it is rainy or windy the herd will be found in low, protected areas out of the weather.

Being of a tropical origin, javelina breed year round, but it has been reported that there is a peak breeding season in South Texas in late November through January with a pulse of young born in May and June. In Arizona, the timing is similar with births peaking during the summer rains of June through August. Most sows give birth to two piglets,



Javelina lend themselves well to primitive weapons hunting and also for honing the big game hunting skills of kids (and adults!).



Low-pressure javelina hunts are great for teaching young hunters important hunting and game care skills.



There is no need to try to cut out the scent gland on the javelina's back above the tail; it skins off cleanly with the hide.

PHOTOS BY JIM HEFFELINGER

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PHOTO COURTESY JERRY DAY



PHOTO BY JIM HEFFELINGER

Javelina are perfectly suited for hunting with primitive weapons such as pistols and archery equipment.

Javelina hunting is an under-appreciated way to get out in the field and pursue and interesting native big game species.

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which are called “reds” because they have reddish fur for the first few months of life. The reds suffer a fairly high mortality since they feed coyotes, eagles, bobcats and anything else that might be brave enough to attempt to outsmart or outrun the tusks of the sow.

BRINGING HOME THE BACON

Javelina meat is considered by some to be less than palatable. Some have even gone as far as to suggest this is the reason we find no evidence of javelina in pre-1700 archeological sites. Perhaps paleontologists should call this the “Precrockpot Period.” However, if properly cared for in the field, javelina provide good eating. The key is to field dress the animal immediately and skin it at your first opportunity. Don’t worry about the scent gland; it is attached to the skin (not the meat) and will come off cleanly when you skin the animal. The hairs of the javelina are covered with this scent from animals rubbing against each other so it is important that you don’t touch the meat with the hand that has been holding the hide. The worst thing you can do to try to cut out this gland and, in the process, smear the scent all over your knife and your hands.

In their native range, javelina and other peccaries are heavily consumed by inhabitants of Central and South America and in some areas make up a large percentage of the protein brought into these villages. To para-

phrase a bumper sticker: “Eat javelina, 10,000 jaguars can’t be wrong.” Native Americans in the Southwest had no long history of eating javelina and did not seem very interested in starting the tradition. There are several stories of native tribes not eating them even when they had the opportunity. It’s possible that since they were not part of their heritage, javelina were seen as somewhat taboo or off limits. Apache scouts traveling with General Crook along the Mexican border in the 1880s pursued a group of “Jabali” with gusto that crossed their path and killed five of six, but did not eat them. Given the other sources of protein Apaches were

known to subsist on, it seems as though there must have been reluctance due to a lack of cultural history with the animal.

Although the range of the javelina continues to expand northward, it did shrink about hundred years ago as European settlers armed with rifles started to occupy the southwestern landscape with no game laws to protect our native edible wildlife species. Through the 1930s, there were no restrictions on the killing of javelina and so many other wildlife species. Settlers soon learned that the hides of javelina were tough and valuable for making high quality leather goods. In his book

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Distributional range of javelina from Lyle Sowls' *The Peccaries*.

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The Peccaries, Lyle Sowls reports that javelina leather was used for making gloves that fetched over \$100, shoes more than \$300 and belts \$150. This high demand and value for an animal with such poor eyesight was a recipe for trouble.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, javelina were pursued with rifles, steel traps, dogs and about any means possible and feasible. Their tough hides were shipped to the East Coast and on to Europe not only for leather articles, but also for bristles that were used for brushes. There are historical reports of thousands and thousands of javelina hides being shipped out of the Southwest and Mexico. The hides were even used locally as barter in many trading posts along the Mexican border. The collared peccary was protected in New Mexico starting in 1937, but not legally hunted until 1967. In 1939, the javelina attained the more respectable role as a game animal in Texas. Now it provides another species that can be pursued by hunters and help provide more diversified income to landowners.

Javelina will respond nicely to a predator call if they are nearby because the herd defensive mechanism kicks in

and they all come together to protect what they think is a small "red" in distress. If a herd is broken up and scattered accidentally (or with a missed shot), they can nearly always be brought back with an urgent predator call. Although javelina are "everywhere," they never seem to be where you are (even when you've seemingly been everywhere!). Knowing how javelina feed and what signs they leave behind is the key to finding javelina. Besides shredded prickly pear pads, scooped-out hedgehog cacti, scattered lechuguilla leaves, look for bedgrounds, droppings, tracks and rooting activity.

Javelina hunting is an excellent opportunity to get out into the field to sharpen your hunting skills, relax, scout for next year's deer hunting areas, or hunt for shed antlers. You can even break up a javelina hunt with some predator calling stands (that might coincidentally produce some peccaries). The great thing about hunting javelina is that there's much less pressure than deer hunting. You can get out in the field and relax and have fun. If you decide to get serious and pursue them intently, you may want to get a crockpot! 🐾🐾

Javelina evolved in thick thorn scrub of Central and South America and that is the habitat they prefer in North America where they expanded into during the last few hundred years.



PHOTO BY JIM HEFFELFINGER

Editors note: Jim Heffelfinger completed a Masters Degree at Texas A&M-Kingsville and then worked on the Rio Paisano Ranch (Brooks/Kleberg Co.) as Manager of Wildlife Operations. He is now an adjunct professor at University of Arizona, Professional Member of Boone & Crockett, Chair of the western states Mule Deer Working Group, and a big game biologist for the Arizona Game & Fish Department. See WWW.DEERNUT.COM for Jim's "Deernut Blog" (where you can find an excellent javelina marinade recipe) and to purchase his book "Deer of the Southwest" published by Texas A&M University Press.