



Javelina are very social animals and the scent gland plays a key role in herd cohesiveness.

# The Mysterious Javelina Scent Gland

By Jim Heffelfinger

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**T**he javelina is a common species in South America, Mexico, and the American Southwest, but it's uncommon in many ways. It doesn't get the respect it deserves, perhaps because it's not known as the best table fare, or maybe its rooting and corn stealing is exaggerated by its domestic invasive cousin, and it's labeled a pest by association. Besides being the mascot for Texas A&M University-Kingsville, it's a pretty interesting and underappreciated species.

### The musk hog

The javelina and its reputation are inseparable from its stink—quite literally. Maybe, just maybe, this accounts for its generally low approval rating. The official formal name for this critter is the collared peccary, named for the white collar that adorns the neck and shoulders.

Throughout history, and modern usage, they have been called stink pigs, musk hogs, and skunk pigs, despite the fact that they are not pigs or hogs at all. 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 of peccaries (Tayassuidae) closely related to the pig family (Suidae).

The real pig family evolved in Eurasia and was imported to the Americas on a ship commanded by Christopher Columbus in 1493. In contrast, peccaries are 100% American made. They evolved in North America and spread to Central and South America.

The javelina we know are the remaining species of several

types of peccaries—some of them huge—that ran around North America during the Pleistocene. At the end of the Pleistocene, no peccaries remained in North America until the last few hundred years when the collared peccary (javelina) spread back up north as far as Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Two larger species went extinct, but three remain: the collared peccary, white-lipped peccary (Central and South America), and the Chacoan peccary (South America).

### An extra navel?

If it looks like a pig, smells like a pig, and sounds like a pig, then why isn't it a pig? In areas with very few feral hogs, javelina are sometimes called pigs, but several physical differences exist between pigs and peccaries. The most noticeable is the scent gland located about 6 inches above the tail on their lower back. As early as the late 1500s when Spanish explorers were the first to describe javelina in the literature, they referred to the gland as an extra navel or navel-like opening. This misidentification continued for hundreds of years with explorer James Ohio Pattie describing them in 1823 as "having their navels on their backs and yielding an odor not less offensive than our polecats."

In reality, it looks more like an udder than a navel with a raised glandular area 2-3 inches across and topped with a nipple. This nipple-like opening is where the clear liquid scent comes out. It's normally metered out as it contacts a surface or other javelina, but it can also squirt out of the opening several inches. Skin muscles associated with the sac give the javelina some level of control over the release of scent.

The opening of the gland has a duct that opens into a large primary sac with many smaller ducts leading to it. Each of these ducts has smaller sacs and different kinds of glands that produce the scent and the liquid to transfer it. All three species of peccaries have this gland, but the collared peccary is reported to have the strongest odor.

Scientists have documented changes in the activity of these glands, which might indicate a complex scent communication occurring among javelina. For example, the smell—to a javelina—could be different depending on whether they're old or young, male or female, reproductive or not, and maybe even physical condition and health. The gland becomes active at the young age of 40 days so it must serve a very important purpose.

### Scent science

Javelina do indeed smell like a pig, meaning, their sense of smell is very good. This is the main sense that hunters must defeat when stalking a javelina for a close shot. The scent gland gives off a strong, skunky odor that can be detected for a long time after javelina pass through an area.

The purpose of the scent gland is to identify all members of the same herd as one unit, like an olfactory group membership card. It also allows young to recognize their mother and



The javelina scent gland is a hairless patch with an opening in the middle and can squirt liquid scent a few inches.

JERRY CLARKE PHOTO

The gland is in the skin but can be seen as a white patch when javelina are skinned.



vice versa, as well as potentially warn others of danger. A common behavior among javelina involves two individuals facing opposite directions and rubbing together head to rump. This allows members of the herd to anoint each other with their scent, thereby bonding everyone together by smell.

This practice of "reciprocal rubbing" is more common when they're on the move or entering and leaving bed grounds. This activity is a greeting and is done regardless of sex (male-male, female-female, male-female). Sometimes one animal will rub their "Parfume de Peccary" on several members of the herd in succession. When it comes to stinking, it's all for one and one for all.

Javelina also use scent to mark their surroundings by rubbing their scent glands on boulders or trees, leaving a black

oily stain. These types of markings occur at higher rates near the edge of their territories than in the center. In captivity when researchers introduced different javelina into pens, they marked fences, posts, and other objects indicating this is an important behavior to claim their real estate.

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 needed to sustain themselves. These territories are defended against the intrusion of other javelina herds by marking the boundaries well.

### Gland removal makes no sense

Despite some YouTube videos and advice from old timers at the feed store, you do not want to cut this gland out when you skin a javelina. The gland is a skin gland and will come right off the animal as you skin it. The best thing to do is pretend it isn't there and you will never encounter it while skinning. Cutting into the gland makes a mess and spreads the oily stink all over your knife and the meat.

Likewise, as noted above, the scent is all over the fur so hold the hide with your off hand and the knife in your dominant hand and never touch the meat with your stinky hand. Transferring the scent from gland or fur to the meat is easily done if you don't keep this in mind. Javelina meat is not bad if treated with respect and prepared properly. Don't let their "third navel" keep you from enjoying this unique native species of the Southwest.

Javelina use their scent glands to mark their territory.



Jack Canine Photo