

RECOGNIZING FERAL HOG SIGN

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Feral hog populations are expanding in Texas, impairing water quality, damaging native plant and animal communities, wrecking landscapes and gardens, and reducing agricultural production in many areas of the state. To develop management strategies for feral hogs, a landowner or manager needs to understand their behaviors and recognize their signs.

Feral hogs leave evidence, or sign, of their passing. The most noticeable sign is the damage caused by their destructive rooting behavior. However, during a drought, rooting is minimal, and other signs are more common, such as hog wallows, rubs, tracks, trails, droppings, and beds.

Hogs are very mobile and routinely travel from one field that offers cover to another field that provides food. To increase trapping success, look for signs to determine their key travel corridors, which include creeks, sloughs, ponds, and other water sources.

ROOTING DAMAGE

As feral hogs feed, they may severely damage native plant and animal communities as well as agricultural crops. If the hogs' rooting in an area disturbs vegetation and soil extensively, the type and abundance of plants there can shift. Rooting damages lawns, gardens, hay pastures, and native range (Fig. 1). It can also reduce the number of plant species in an area.

Feral hog diets differ throughout the year, depending on the availability of a wide variety of food items. During drought, they compete with native wildlife species for acorns, pecans, and other food.



Figure 1. Feral hogs can cause damage to rural pastures and urban landscapes alike.

CROP DAMAGE

Field crops commonly damaged by feral hogs include rice, sorghum, wheat, corn, soybeans, peanuts, potatoes, watermelon, and cantaloupe. Hogs not only consume planted seed, emerging seedlings, and maturing fruits and grains, but they also trample crops (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Feral hog damage to sorghum caused by both trampling and foraging.

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WALLOWES AND RUBS

During warm months, feral hogs create wallows in moist areas near ponds, creeks, and sloughs (Fig. 3) to access mud, which helps them cool down and ward off biting insects. In hot weather, hogs often lie in wallows during the day.

They deposit waste in these locations that is likely to contribute bacteria and pathogens to stream systems.

After wallowing, hogs rub on fixed objects to remove dried mud, hair, and parasites. Look for mud and hair on trees, fallen logs, fence posts, rocks, and utility poles, particularly those near water or wallows. Hogs have an affinity for utility poles treated with creosote, and many poles within a hog's home range will have visible markings.

FERAL HOG TRACKS AND TRAILS

Feral hog tracks and trails may yield information on abundance, animal size, direction of travel, and local behavior patterns. Hoofed tracks generally register two toes but may also show two dewclaws, which are smaller toes found higher on the leg.

Hogs have blunted or rounded toes, and this trait is apparent in tracks they leave behind. Deer tracks are typically heart- or spade-shaped; feral hog tracks appear more rounded (Fig. 4).



Figure 3. Wallows (A) can be found in wet areas during warmer months, and rubs are often associated with them. In areas where populations are large, feral hog rubs can often be found on utility poles (B).

A well-worn feral hog trail indicates frequent use, and a lack of vegetation along the trail may suggest that many hogs use the path (Fig. 5). Where trails cross under fences, the hogs often leave hair and mud on the wires as they pass underneath.

FERAL HOG DROPPINGS

Examining hog droppings can reveal what hogs have been eating, which may help determine appropriate control methods or trap locations. Feral hogs are omnivorous, eating both plant and animal matter, and their diet varies by location and season. For these reasons, feral hog droppings take many forms, which can make identification difficult.

Hog droppings are often tubular, filled with mast (such as acorns and pecans) and other vegetation. The shape and consistency of their droppings ranges from that resembling those of domestic dogs to those of horses (Fig. 6). A diet of young grasses and shoots results in loose tubes and formless patties.

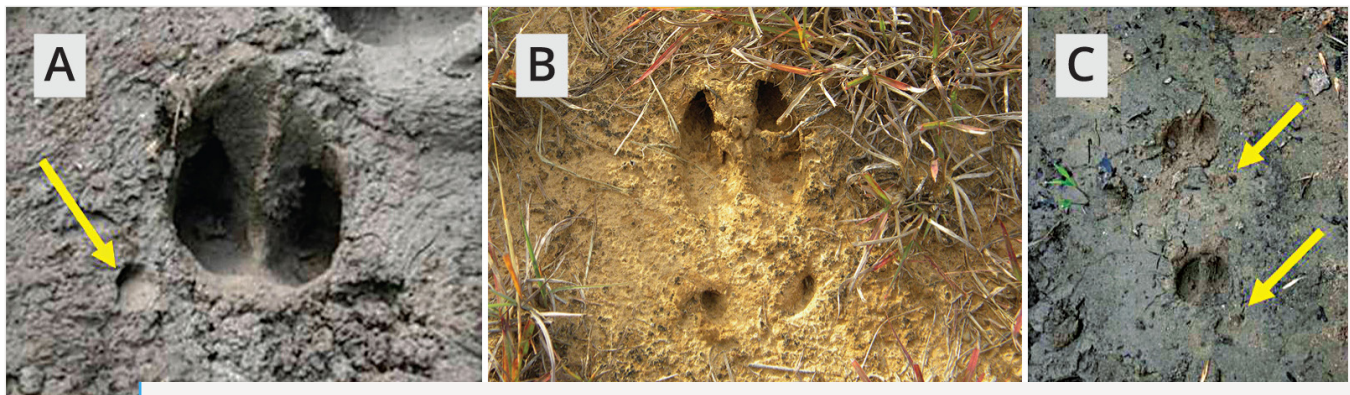


Figure 4. Circular shape of a feral hog track (A). Note the dewclaw mark on the bottom left. When visible in the tracks, hog dewclaws typically register wider than the hoof. Both dewclaws may not register, depending on the soil type and animal movement. In deer tracks (B), the dewclaws typically do not register wider than the hoof. Compare again with front and hind tracks of a feral hog (C). Notice the round shape, blunted toes, and wide dewclaw marks.

FERAL HOG BEDS

Hogs create shallow beds by overturning the soil to expose the cool dirt in which they lay. During the heat of the day, feral hogs spend a significant amount of time in beds. They typically bed in dense vegetation such as vines, brambles, fallen trees, and other thick or thorny plants (Fig. 7). These areas offer security and shade and may be difficult to identify.

To find bedding locations, follow the hog trail into extremely thick vegetation. Hog beds are also often associated with wallowing areas.

SUMMARY

Recognizing the signs of feral hog activity is critical to developing a management strategy. Signs include roting damage, crop damage, wallows, rubs, tracks, trails, droppings, and beds. These signs can yield much information about feral hog activity.

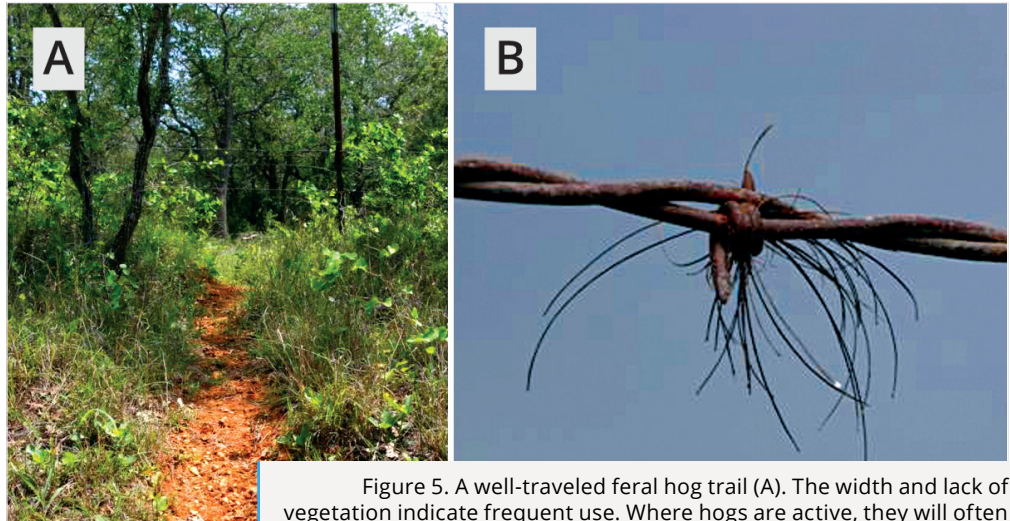


Figure 5. A well-traveled feral hog trail (A). The width and lack of vegetation indicate frequent use. Where hogs are active, they will often leave behind hair and mud on fences as they move through the area (B).

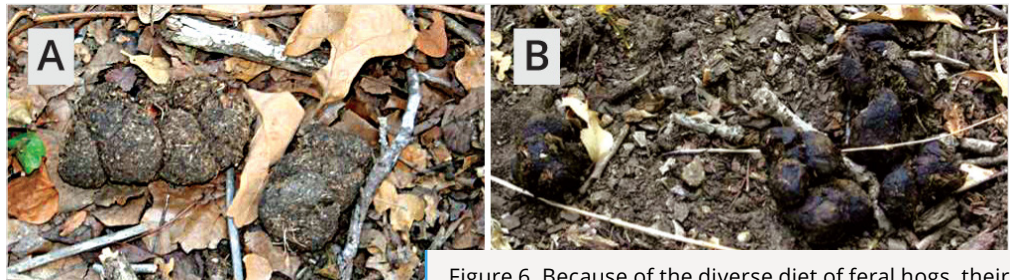


Figure 6. Because of the diverse diet of feral hogs, their droppings vary greatly in shape and consistency.

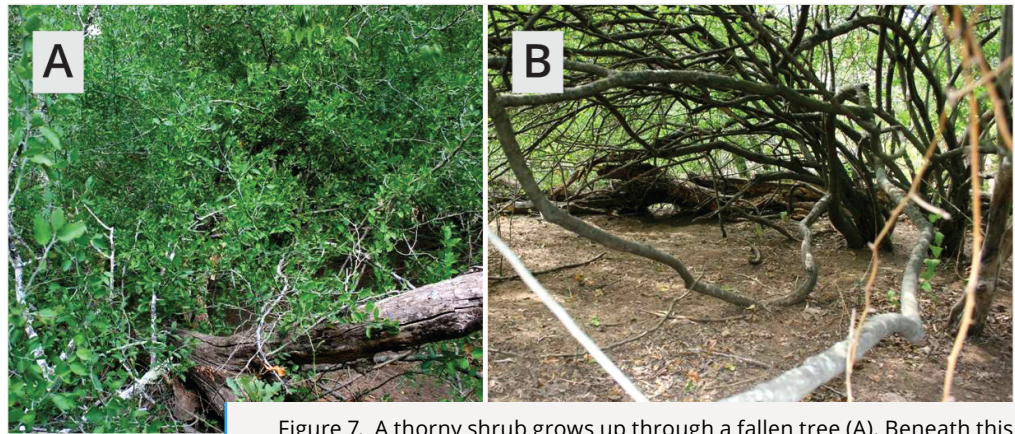


Figure 7. A thorny shrub grows up through a fallen tree (A). Beneath this thick vegetation are many feral hog beds. Feral hogs overturn soil and clear vegetation, creating shallow beds beneath thick brush cover (B).

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