

R Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

PIG PERIL

Amongst the Northern Territory's most unwanted guests are feral pigs. They are a very successful animal as they are able to survive almost anywhere, as long as there is a bit of water.

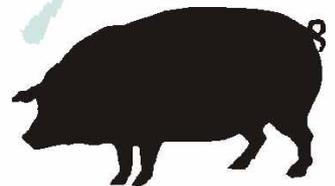
INTRODUCED BY US - THEY CAME ...

Pigs, *Sus scrofa*, were introduced to Australia as a food source by early European settlers during the 1800's. The first pigs came from Europe and Asia, after being collected on the way to Australia. These original visitors soon became wild 'feral' animals after either escaping from captivity or being deliberately released by European settlers as they spread across Australia.

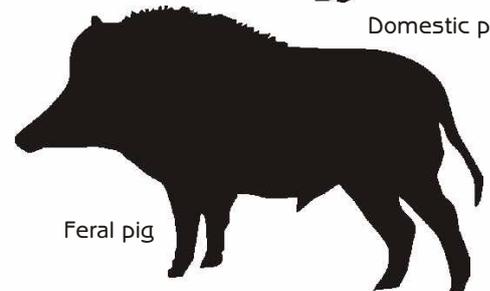
Can you think of any other feral animals? Most of them were introduced by us!

... THEY SAW ... THEY CONQUERED.

Australian feral pigs look different to domestic pigs. They have adapted to their new environment by reverting back to the appearance of the Wild Boar of Europe. Hence they now have a deeper-set brow, larger tusks and darker hairier skin (usually black, but may be blotchy black, brown and cream). They are also much bigger and stronger than their tame domestic cousins. The male 'boar' has become especially big and strong which is handy for fighting and impressing the female 'sows'.



Domestic pig



Feral pig

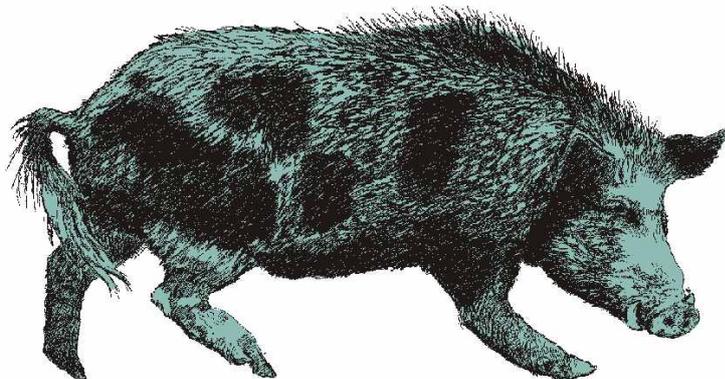
These silhouettes show how the domestic pig has changed to the feral pig of today.

PIGGY PROFILE

Male feral pigs can weigh up to 180kg and be up to 2m long.

When frightened, their hair stands on end forming a mane, a bit like a lion's.

They have large ears and excellent hearing but relatively poor eyesight.



They are surprisingly fast runners when it comes to avoiding danger.

Feral pigs have an amazing sense of smell and can detect edible grubs and plant root tubers up to half a metre below ground. Their nose is used for digging, smelling and fighting.

Their lower jaw has a mean set of tusks.



PIGLETS GALORE!

Feral pigs can multiply rapidly. Before they are one year old they can mate and can have babies (called 'litters') up to four times a year. These litters generally consist of 6 piglets, but not all survive. Even though their mums are very protective, many piglets get lost, starve or are eaten by predators such as dingoes and wild dogs. The surviving piglets stay with mum until the next group are born. The poor old males leave home at about 18 months old and spend their life alone, only joining groups to mate.

DID YOU KNOW?

Despite the diseases that feral pigs can potentially carry and pass onto livestock, many are now being shot and shipped off overseas, to places like Germany, to end up on people's dinner plates!

PERSISTENT, PESKY PIGS

Feral pigs are most likely here to stay, for they are difficult to remove. They are very wary animals, making them hard to find in the bush. Trapping, poisoning and aerial shooting have had some success. But, a good strong fence around delicate habitats (like rainforest patches) is the best defence that Rangers in National Parks can use.



PIGS BY NAME, PIGS BY NATURE

Wetland habitats, such as the floodplains of the Top End, make perfect homes for feral pigs. Late in the dry season large groups (sometimes hundreds) congregate to dig up vast patches of Water Chestnut (*Eleocharis sp.*) reed beds. This can be devastating to Magpie Geese populations which depend on this food source to survive.

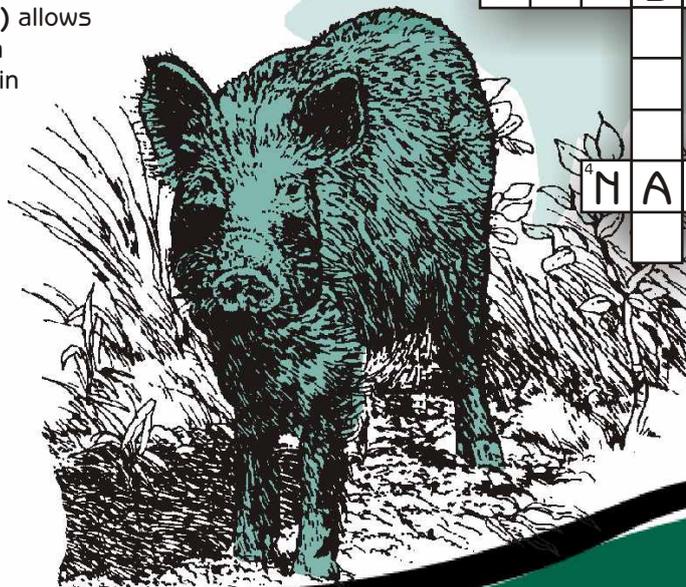
Feral pigs delight in shallow fresh water, where they can keep cool and wallow in the mud for protection from biting insects and parasites. As the floodplains dry out the damage caused by pigs becomes much worse in the dry cracked mud around the waters edge.

Feral pigs are **omnivores**, meaning they will eat just about anything that they can find: grasses, leaves, fruits, roots and tubers, agricultural crops, insects, crayfish, frogs, snakes, the eggs of turtles and ground-nesting birds, and small young mammals. They even attack sick or injured livestock and they don't mind dining on rotting animal carcasses as well- yuck!!

PIGGY PESTS

Like many feral animals, feral pigs are destructive to both the natural environment as well as to farming areas. By filling in the missing words you can work out what problems they cause.

A Feral pig's keen sense of (5 across) allows them to eat most things they like in a particular area, often wiping out certain (6 down) species. They (2 down) weeds, cause soil (1 across) through their digging and wallowing activity, and can potentially carry (3 down) that can harm native wildlife and domestic farm animals. They also compete directly with a lot of (4 across) wildlife by eating the same foods.



Want to learn more about feral pigs?

Check out the book *The Mammals of Australia* edited by Ronald Strahan.

