

How Curious – Feral Hogs

MUSIC: How Curious theme

Rachel Hopkin Script

Hello. I'm Rachel Hopkin. Welcome to KGOU's How Curious podcast and show. And today's episode is all about ...

FX

Pig oinking

Rachel Hopkin Script

... pigs. Specifically certain pig populations in Oklahoma.

FX

Pig oinking

Rachel-in-situ

What am I showing you picture of?

Rachel Hopkin Script

I've given Jeff Pennington from the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation an image of a small, fat and hairy pinkish red pig looking in through a patio door.

Jeff Pennington

You can't be certain, but it looks like a feral hog, but it could be somebody's livestock, and that's part of the problem with feral hogs, they can be hard to distinguish. Since it's sitting on somebody's porch, I would suspect that it might be domesticated of some sort.

Rachel Hopkin Script

In fact, the pig in question was sitting on my porch.

I live in rural east Norman, close to Lake Thunderbird, and this pig started coming onto my property a few months back. I found him utterly adorable, started naming him inside my head – Horace, Gerald and Cedric were all top contenders - and began putting food out for him. After a week or two, I sent a text to my neighbors asking if they knew whose it was. I got an immediate call back from one of them who said "Rachel, that's a feral hog and you need to take care of it" and she was not meaning feed it tea and biscuits. She meant that I should organize for someone to come and kill it. Now, I was absolutely not interested in having Horace/Cedric/Gerald exterminated though I did stop putting out the food and after a while, he stopped visiting me. Since Jeff thinks he's probably domesticated, I can only hope that he's found his way home. But this got me wondering about feral hogs in Oklahoma. Why did my neighbor get so riled up when she thought that's what he was. She's certainly not wrong that there are feral hogs in this area.

FX

Car door slamming, sound of footsteps

Rachel Hopkin Script

Jeff has brought me to the Lexington Wildlife Management Area southeast of Norman

Jeff Pennington

This is just a sign that you have feral hogs, and you think “well, what do you mean?” See this red mud on all of these trees around here.

Rachel-in-situ

Oh yeah

Jeff Pennington

What they do is there's a mud hole around here and they can't sweat so they'll get in there and lay in areas like that, then they'll come up to these trees and they'll try and scrape the parasites off of them.

Rachel Hopkin Script

There was red earth all around the bases of the trees. So what exactly are feral hogs?

Jeff Pennington

Feral hogs would be hogs that are living out on the landscape without man's assistance. Nobody's feeding them. Nobody's giving them veterinary medicine. They're just living out on the landscape.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The species name is *sus scrofa*, and these animals are not native to the US. Some of the earliest explorers brought pigs with them over 5 centuries ago and there have been successive waves of swine immigration since then, including in Oklahoma.

Jeff Pennington

Settlers years and years ago, you know, 100, 125 years ago, especially in southeast Oklahoma, there were some people down there that would let their pigs go and kind of run semi-wild and then they would round them up in the fall. Why did they do that? Well they were able to survive on their own. Plus it lent itself to that because there was not refrigeration. So they could gather them in the fall and winter and harvest some of them and be able to keep the meat a lot longer than they could if they rounded them up in the summer. Over the course of time, more of those pigs never were rounded up, and then as people began hunting them, you started having pigs getting illegally moved and that's kind of where we got pigs in northern and central Oklahoma, and they didn't migrate up here. They came in the back of somebody's trailer illegally, and they let them go. Why did they do that? Because they wanted to hunt the pigs up here.

Rachel-in-situ

So, so when we're talking about feral hogs or wild pigs ... I mean, should I be using one term or another term: feral hogs/wild pigs. And are there lots of different types of pig that that could come under this general banner of feral hogs/wild pigs?

Jeff Pennington

Yeah, you've got your domesticated breeds, and generally it's a very Heinz 57, so to speak, mixture of those domestic breeds. And then to top that off, you got the Eurasian wild boar that has been intentionally brought in by some hunters because it makes the hogs go more wild and

makes them bigger, makes their tusks bigger. There have been places where people have illegally stocked them and those have interbred with these domestic pigs so you truly have you know in a lot of instances, they don't look domestic at all because they've got a lot a significant amount of European wild boar genetics in them. In general, feral hogs - as opposed to that picture that you had; that pig looked like a butterball, you know. He was fat and the feral hogs are lean. They're not getting food from anybody in general.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Now, bear in mind that the descendants of domesticated pigs that help make up the feral hog population come from a stock that were purposefully bred by the pork industry to be able to reproduce quickly with large litters. That fecundity is now part of what makes it so difficult to curb the numbers of these animals out on the landscape.

Josh Gaskamp

They're the most rapidly producing large mammal in North America.

Rachel Hopkin Script

This is Josh Gaskamp from Oklahoma's Noble Research Institute. Josh told me that there are today probably close to a million feral hogs in the Sooner State. Besides their high rate of reproduction, there are other reasons why they've become so rampant.

Josh Gaskamp

They pretty much eat anything with a calorie. They can find food very readily because they have a very keen sense of smell. They can survive in a broad range of temperatures. They can survive in any environment we put them in. And pigs are just very smart animals.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I was curious to know how their intelligence manifested in this context.

Josh Gaskamp

They very quickly recognize a hazardous situation. And so a lot of people that do try to control, you know, a landowner that that I've worked with in the past may have had hundreds of pigs on his 200 acre property. And they try to manage those by trapping them and removing them from that property. And those efforts to do so fail very often because pigs recognize man-made structures that are that are built for confinement and recognize "I don't want to go in there because that means that I'm don't get to live out here anymore." So they understand those type of things. They're very wary. And then what further exacerbates that issue is like when ranchers are trapping pigs, the ones that they actually capture in the trap, are the least intelligent or least wary ones. And so the ones that get to stay out on the landscape and contribute to future populations are the smartest ones. And so feral pigs, that's also why they're a big problem because each generation becomes smarter and smarter as we attempt to control them.

Rachel Hopkin Script

How to attempt to control them falls outside the scope of this episode, but there are good reasons to do so, since they cause all sorts of damage to the environment, property, agricultural land. They also carry diseases. And in addition ...

Jeff Pennington

Feral hogs are terrible for wildlife ...

Rachel Hopkin Script

Jeff Pennington again

Jeff Pennington

... and the main reasons are, number one, they compete for wildlife food sources. You know, you got something out here that's going to eat a tremendous amount of food per day and a lot of that food could have been consumed by wildlife. And then the second part of that is, if wildlife can't get away from them, wildlife will become the food. So you've got feral hogs consuming native wild animals, especially reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates are the main ones that they consume. But they have been documented to kill deer fawns. Anything that can't get away from them, they will kill and eat them.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I've put some links to resources designed to help those dealing with a feral hog situation on this episode's webpage. Just search for KGOU and How Curious.

Feral hogs are especially rife in southeastern Oklahoma. By contrast, there's another pig population in that region that's anything but. I'm talking about the Choctaw hog. It's a smaller pig that's made distinct by fleshy wattles which hang from its neck and by its fused hooves, which resemble those of a mule or horse. Still part of the *sus scrofa* species, the Choctaw hog is a critically rare heritage breed that has deep cultural significance for the Choctaw people.

Ian Thompson

[Introduces himself in the Choctaw language]

Hello, my name is Ian Thompson. I serve as the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Ian told me that the Choctaw people have been on the American continent at least 13,000 years. They are the third largest tribe in the US. It's possible that the Choctaw hog descends from swine brought in by the Spanish and maybe given to members of the tribe as gifts.

Ian Thompson

We know the Choctaw people originally considered pigs to be filthy animals, so Choctaw people did not eat hog meat. There are accounts from the French from the first half of the 1700s where they talk of Choctaw people raising hogs but they didn't eat the meat. They actually exported it to French colonies on the Gulf coast.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Over time this changed though, and hog meat became an increasingly important part of the Choctaw diet.

Ian Thompson

It became so important that it caused linguistic reversals. um There's the Choctaw name for the possum, originally it was shokha. And then when pigs came, they were seen as having some similar characteristics to the possums. So Choctaw people started calling the possum shokha, the same name as the pig. Well, that got confusing so they started calling the native possum shokhata which means silver pig. So the non-native pig replaced the native possum linguistically.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The pig eventually entered Choctaw oral tradition. In early 1800s, the tribe moved away from traditional agricultural practices to a more homesteading kind of lifestyle.

Ian Thompson

We have accounts from that time period that talk about when a child was born, the parents would set aside a male and female horse, a male and female chicken, a male and female hog and those would be the newborn's. And by the time that newborn had grown up to become a young person and ready to marry and start their own family, those animals would have reproduced. So they were ready to start their own stock right there. I mean they had their own herd already We know that animals came on the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, 40s, 50s from our homeland in Mississippi to southeastern Oklahoma.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Where they've been ever since, though in dwindling numbers. According to the Livestock Conservancy, there are probably only around 300 breeding animals remaining. Ian hypothesizes that this may be because of their smaller size, which meant they've not been cultivated by the pork industry.

Ian Thompson

So there's not humans supporting their numbers. You know, you have these massive hog farms that animals sometimes escape from. That's not going on with the Choctaw hog because they're not really farmed, so then they're genetically overwhelmed by these other hogs that vastly outnumber them because they're what people raise today.

Rachel-in-situ

Hi. Are you Dusty?

Dusty Vickray

Yes ma'am.

Rachel-in-situ

Lovely to meet you. I'm Rachel.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma keeps a preservation herd of Choctaw hogs on its land. It's not too very far from where I live so I decided to pay them a visit. Dusty Vickray oversees their care.

Dusty Vickray

We'll try and see if we can get to where we can see them. They're pretty spooky. They won't just come up to you, you know.

Rachel-in-situ

We'll do our best.

Dusty Vickray

Oh yeah. We'll see what we can do.

FX

Sound of vehicle starting. The sound of driving through thick brush.

Rachel Hopkin Script

We set off in a very rugged off road vehicle that was open to the elements. I clung to the side of it once we got to the pigs' pen since we were driving over very thick brush.

Dusty Vickray

You can't just put them in a completely open pen where there's no shade, you know what I mean.

Rachel-in-situ

They need to have something like a natural environment.

Dusty Vickray

Something like this so it does make it a little bit hard to find them sometimes. Hey, right there.

Rachel-in-situ

[Gasps] Oh yeah

Rachel Hopkin Script

Suddenly we saw some. They were maybe 100 yards away.

Rachel-in-situ

Is it safe to get out?

Dusty Vickray

Yes. It'll be best if you ... they're probably going to try to run this way.

Rachel-in-situ

Okay.

Dusty Vickray

But I would just try and step out right here, but they're going to run any minute. They're going to go down by that fence.

FX

Sound of footsteps.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I tried to approach.

Rachel-in-situ

Oh, there's a lot of them, about 6, 7, 8 running away. Running away very quickly. They did not want to meet me. [Laughing]. I've just driven 130 miles to see that. That was great.

Rachel Hopkin Script

It really was. It was worth the trip.

Thank you so much to Dusty and all the contributors to this episode, including the pigs. Thanks also to Isabella Cowan who is currently researching the ancient roots of the Choctaw hog at OU.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

Don't forget, if you have an idea for a future episode, we're all ears so please drop us a line at curious@kgou.org.

OK FH population mostly in the eastern two thirds of the state, spottier as you get out west

B/w 500,000 and 1 million feral hogs in OK