

THE DAILY

A Texas hunter takes aim to shoot feral pigs from the sky, now legal for anyone under the 'Pork Chopper' law.

AMAZING VIDEO



FULL BOAR



Texas goes hog wild as feral beasts targeted in helicopter hunts

Russell A. Graves/The Daily

AP

Gatty Images

POLITICAL FOOTBALL

Boehner's gambit moves Obama speech



Gatty Images

NFL PREVIEW

Today: NFC South





Mike Morgan pilots while student Ryan McGowen rides shotgun during a helicopter hunting lesson.
Erik German/The Daily



APORKALYPSE NOW

Texas begins air assault on feral pigs, allowing anyone to be an aerial hog hunter

By Erik German

with videos by Solana Pyne



HOG-GONE IT! IT'S WAR



Texas has been messed with, and now it's sending in the helicopters.

Starting today, Texans are taking their ceaseless fight against feral pigs to the skies, thanks to the Texas "Pork Chopper" bill, signed by Gov. Rick Perry. Once limited to killing invasive swine on the ground, licensed hunters can now shoot them from helicopters — for a price.

"I'm ready to book a hunt today!" said David Fason, 48, who drove nine hours and paid \$350 on a recent weekend to attend a class in Houston — the first of its kind — on how to safely shoot assault rifles at pigs from the air.

Of the 5 million or so feral hogs currently running wild and wreaking havoc in America, about half them are at large in the Lone Star State. Invasive pigs crowd out native species, feast on crops, tear up fields and raise all manner of horticultural hell. Statewide, hog damage to agriculture

alone totals \$52 million per year.

Texans have tried just about everything to stop the swine — trapping, snaring, and



Mike Morgan, right, teaches Patrick Gray how to handle an AR-15 assault rifle during a safety course in Houston.
Erik German/The Daily

a free-fire hunting season that allows feral hog extermination day or night, 365 days per year, with any weapon a person can legally buy. None of it has worked.

Until now, aerial pig-eradication has



The challenges of aiming from the air

Tap hotspots for more

Heads up, hog! This little piggy could go splat soon - helicopter hunting begins today in Texas.
Russell A. Graves for The Daily



BOSS HOGS



“You’re going to have every hunter from here to Alaska coming down here.”

- Mike Morgan, president of Vertex Helicopters



been legal only for specially permitted companies that charge landowners hundreds of dollars per hour for the service and leave the dead animals where they lie. Under the new rules, hunters can now pay to fly. It's unlikely many more of the pigs will be eaten, but helicopter hog-control could become virtually free for some landowners. And hunters say they're eager to pick up the check.

"There's no other place in the world I know of that you can do this without being in the military," Fason said. "It's an adrenaline rush I haven't felt before."

That rush involves skimming 50 feet above the ground in a chopper, leaning out the open door into the wind and rotor blast, and then leveling a gas-powered semi-automatic AR-15 at a 200-pound animal galloping across the open range. It hasn't been a tough sell.

"It's amazing," said Ama Lukens, who, until today, was one of the few Texans

legally allowed to shoot feral swine from the air. She's an employee of Vertex Helicopters, a Houston-based company that charges landowners \$475 an hour for airborne hog extermination and bills itself as the first to offer an aerial hunter safety course. Lukens posted a video of her first helicopter pig-shoot on YouTube, she said, and the response is either a commentary on her marksmanship or the potential public interest in these kind of aerial hunts.

"It's got like 15,000 views," Lukens said. "Just saying."

The mounting interest has forced Mike Morgan, president and head pilot of Vertex Helicopters, to walk a fine line. He concedes there's a business opportunity in hunters clamoring to pay \$475 an hour just for thrills.

"The potential revenue is going to be overwhelming," Morgan said. "You're going to have every hunter from here to

AR-15

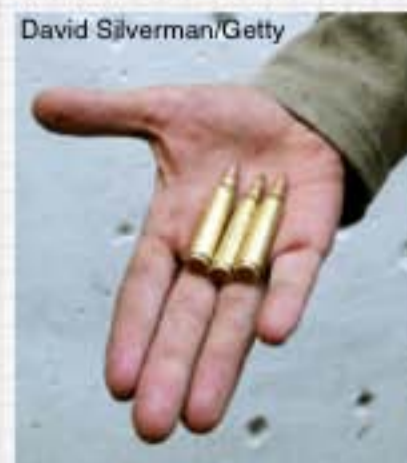
Civilian version of standard U.S. military-issue assault rifle that's used in the pig hunts. Semiautomatic action allows for fast follow-up shots.



5.56mm cartridge

- Low recoil
- Lightweight

30-round magazine





Oakwood, Texas, sod farmer Bruce Wittig surveys feral pig damage, which statewide costs \$52 million per year. Erik German/The Daily

Alaska coming down here – and I say that literally because those people have been calling us.”

Still, Morgan, a former Army pilot, is

SILENCE OF THE HAMS



preaching caution. “This is most certainly not sport hunting in any way shape or form,” he said. “This is an aerial eradication program.”

It’s not legally required, but Morgan advises any prospective shooter to take an aerial hunter safety class like the one he’s offering. Semiautomatic weapons and helicopters have plenty of moving, deadly parts, he said, and shooting while flying must be done carefully.

“Otherwise you’re going to have people shooting holes through rotor blades,” Morgan said. “And then there’s a \$300,000 aircraft that’s going to be a smoking pile of dirt on somebody’s farm out there.”

Some have questioned the ethics of aerial hog-shooting — with objections coming from what may be a surprising group of critics. In addition to being an evangelical preacher, Phillip Swallows is in the business of wholesale feral hog-elimination. The East Texas-based entre-





“The perfect machine to survive.”

Females can become pregnant at 1 year old, and they average:

Six piglets per litter.

Three litters every two years.

ARE YOU SMARTER THAN A SWINE?



A hog feasts on shelled corn meant to attract deer. The plentiful supply of food has made the pigs fat and fertile.
Russell A. Graves





preneur buys live wild pigs from trappers and, in high season, sells 30,000 pounds of pork weekly to Texas slaughterhouses.



An aerial hog-shooter-in-training, Keith Bollom of Orchard, Texas, brandishes a borrowed AR-15 assault rifle in Houston. Erik German/The Daily

They sell the meat as “wild boar” to upscale buyers in the United States, Europe and Japan.

Swallows advocates trapping the hogs, and says the aerial hunting will cause new problems.

“Half of what you shoot just runs off and lays there,” Swallows said. “Some die off in the underbrush. Some of them live. Trapping, when you’ve got ‘em, you’ve got ‘em — and it’s humane.”

Texas is one of the only states with buying stations that inspect live-caught feral hogs and market them for human consumption. The network of buying stations currently processes about 80,000 hogs per year, according to state figures. Swallows said the system ensures the meat isn’t wasted, and it avoids the potential hazards of animals being left maimed by off-target aerial shots.

Helicopter hog-extermimators like Morgan insist they follow an “overkill” policy, shooting each animal several times to ensure a clean kill.

“We’re going to come back and make sure that the hog is dead,” Morgan said. “Our goal is not to have a hog limping around.”

Texas wildlife officials said trapping and helicopter shooting are both essential

The legend of Hogzilla

Examples abound online of hunters claiming to have shot legendary, ultra-big hogs tipping scales at 400, 800 even 1,000 pounds. Wildlife biologists say feral pigs weighing 300 pounds or more are extremely rare and many purported “hogzillas” have turned out to be outright hoaxes or overfed captives. Others, like this beast, purportedly killed and

photographed in Georgia in 2004, were never independently verified. Biologists say the few cases of proven super hogs almost always involve monsters that had access to an unlimited food supply and were descended from large breeds of domestic swine.





In Texas, a relatively small, centuries-old feral pig population has exploded in recent decades.



TEXAS

Hog map in Texas

tools for controlling the pig population. In the state's heavily wooded northeast, tree cover obscures aerial views and trapping works best. But in the wide-open rice fields down south or on the open rangeland out west, helicopters have proven invaluable.

"They're able in some cases to remove 25 to 30 hogs per hour of flight time," said Billy Higginbotham, a wildlife biologist with Texas AgriLife Extension Service.

LOVE THE SMELL OF BACON IN THE MORNING





Russell A. Graves



TARGET PROFILE

Height:
30 inches

Weight:
200 pounds

Top speed:
30 mph

"Why not use as many of the tools as you've got available to you?"

As a species, the hogs make a formidable adversary. By some accounts, wild hogs are smart as border collies, omnivorous as bears and just about as hard to kill. They have few known predators and deliver piglets half a dozen at a time. Females average three litters every two years and can become pregnant just one year after being born themselves. Higgin-

botham said Texas must cull its pig population 60 to 70 percent each year just to keep that population constant. He called hogs "the most reproductively active large mammal on the face of the Earth."

First introduced in North America by Spanish explorers, pigs have been running loose in America for more than 450 years. Feral hogs are a mix of escaped domestic swine and hairy, tusked Eurasian wild boars. Prized game animals, the boars





have been stocked for decades on private hunting preserves whose fences have repeatedly proven to be less than hog-proof. Feral hogs were once largely confined to the American South, but established populations have steadily spread to at least 37 states, including Michigan, California and, perhaps most recently, upstate New York.

In Texas, a relatively small, centuries-old feral pig population has exploded in recent decades, its growth spurred by what Higginbotham calls a “perfect storm” of hog-friendly factors. For one thing, sows have larger and more frequent litters when they’re well-fed. And they’ve had access to a lot of food in Texas. Residents distribute 300 million pounds of shelled corn each year in woodland feeders designed to attract deer for hunting, a \$2.2 billion industry statewide.

But the hogs’ spread can’t be blamed entirely on the year-round shelled-corn buffet. Pig-stalking enthusiasts in Texas have often loaded the captured animals onto trailers and released them into fresh areas.

“I had a hunting lease up here that I thought it needed some hogs on,” confessed one 61-year-old former hunter from Longview. He said he now works full time trapping the offspring of the beasts he and other hunters released.

“Thought they would be exciting,” he added. “They was for the first year or two. Then they exploded.”

Texas’ feral hog problem has become so widespread that Higginbotham said more than 90 percent of Texas counties are now infested.

“Pigs don’t have wings, but they trailer extremely well,” he said. “There are two groups of landowners in Texas — those that have feral hogs, and those that are about to.”

Shellie Jones, 65, who owns land in East Texas, north of the town of Athens,



Phillip Swallows, who buys trapped feral hogs and sells them for meat, opposes the aerial slaughter. Erik German/The Daily

has been locked in an exasperating fight with the animals.

“The hogs are winning the war,” Jones said. “They are winning the war in East Texas.”

Some growers are welcoming recreational airborne shooters.

“It’s great,” said Frank Stasney, 61, a rice farmer south of Houston who said he’s lost as much as \$50,000 per year to hog damage. “Instead of me paying these guys coming out here, they’re actually coming out here for free.” ■