



# Feral Hogs Impact Ground-nesting Birds

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Landowners in the Plum Creek Watershed of Hays, Caldwell, and Travis counties are aware of the damage that feral hogs can cause to crops and pastures. Many also realize that feral hogs compete with native wildlife for food sources. Typically, feral hogs are not thought of as predators, but they fill that role as well.

Feral hogs are opportunistic omnivores, meaning they eat whatever plant and animal matter is available. Eggs of ground-nesting birds like northern bobwhite and wild turkey are on their menu.

## Northern Bobwhite

The northern bobwhite (Figure 1) has been declining over much of its historic range for several decades. To better understand predation of northern bobwhite nests Extension wildlife specialists teamed with landowners and county extension agents to monitor predation rates in the Rolling Plains of Texas.



Figure 1. Northern bobwhite male.

During trials conducted in 1993 and 1994, they found 23.5% of simulated nests were consumed by feral hogs on a ranch in Foard County, and 11.5% of simulated nests (Figure 2) were depredated by hogs on a ranch in Shackelford County. This suggests that feral hog nest predation is a contributing factor to the northern bobwhite population decline. Those experiments were conducted nearly twenty years ago, and feral hog populations have increased substantially since that time.

## Wild Turkey

Three subspecies of wild turkey are found in Texas. The most common and wide-ranging is the Rio Grande wild turkey. Eastern wild turkey are less common and restocking efforts are underway in eastern Texas to re-establish their population. Small populations of the Merriam's wild turkey are found in western Texas. For Rio Grande and eastern wild turkey, researchers have documented nest predation by feral hogs (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Three eggs used to simulated northern bobwhite quail's nest.

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Figure 3. Feral hog consuming wild turkey eggs (Trail camera photo by Dr. Brett Collier).



Figure 4. Eggs found in Rio Grande Wild Turkey nest (Photo by Dr. Brett Collier).

## Turkey Nest Success Study

The Gus Engeling Wildlife Management Area, between Palestine and Corsicana, is one location where eastern turkeys were released. To monitor movement and nest success, turkeys were fitted with radio transmitters and nests were located and observed (Figure 4). Observations showed that feral hogs, among other predators, consumed eggs from nests. In an attempt to increase nesting success, researchers increased control of feral hogs on this 10,872 acre wildlife management area. Results in 1998 showed when only 68 hogs were removed nest success was 0%, but when control was increased and 313 feral hogs were removed in the following year 25% of the nests were successful.

While feral hogs are not the only nest predators of wild turkeys, this research indicated that reducing or driving feral hogs from the area increased nest success. Other contributing factors like rainfall could also contribute to nest success, but removal of a non-native predator like feral hogs should be considered a part of ranch management. It is important to utilize several control methods for feral hogs, which may

include trapping, snaring, shooting, and use of dogs and hunting. Given the high reproductive rate of feral hogs, many more native wildlife species are likely impacted. The bottom line is that native wildlife species need a reprieve in the form of aggressive feral hog reduction.

## Additional Information

To hone your knowledge of feral hogs and reduction methods, several publications were developed by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service and can be downloaded at no charge by going to the Plum Creek Watershed Partnership website at <http://plumcreek.tamu.edu/feralhogs>.

This website also has an on-line tool which allows landowners and the general public to report feral hog sightings and control measures.

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