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Training Wild Pigs to Bait

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I often refer to adopting “best management practices” to be successful at reducing wild pig populations in order to reduce the damage these invasive exotics inflict upon the landscape. When it comes to baiting wild pigs for shooting or trapping, training the pigs to bait is critical.



Watch for signs of wild pig presence including wallows and mud on trees and poles.



Pasture damage by wild pig rooting is a common problem for Texas landowners.

The steps for training pigs to bait are the same regardless of whether the landowner plans to shoot or trap the pigs. Step 1 is to identify that pigs are present—hopefully based on their sign left behind and before damage begins. Damage is fairly obvious and on rare occasions landowners may even lay their eyes on a pig or sounder of pigs providing confirmation of their presence. Remember, there are but two kinds of landowners in Texas—those that have wild pigs and those that are about to have wild pigs. In addition, there are but two kinds of wild pigs—those causing damage and those about to cause damage!

Once you have documented the pigs’ presence, back-track them to as near their daytime cover as you can. That often ends at the property line for many landowners but still, get as close as you can. Offer bait at that site or if you are unsure of where they spend their daylight hours establish multiple bait sites. Place the bait so the prevailing wind direction can carry the scent of the bait toward the pigs. Hang a trail camera on the bait site or simply rake the ground smooth and observe for pig tracks (hooves will be more rounded and often larger than those of a deer). I much prefer using a camera over a rake since it also records the number of pigs as well as times and dates that pigs are present.



A trail camera records the times and dates as well as the number of pigs visiting a bait site.



Bait should be distributed and monitored by trail camera.



Pigs responding to a camera – monitored bait site. Monitoring is critical in pig removal.

Baits can differ and pigs often respond to different baits seasonally. The most difficult time to get pigs on bait is when native food items (e.g., acorns) or cultivated crops (e.g., peanuts, corn) are abundant. While shelled corn is the “gold standard” of pig baits, practically every species of critter out there also eats corn. Be creative—sour some grain for one bait site, use shelled corn at another or perhaps even try a dry dog food or cheese-based catfish bait in combination with corn or milo. Also, if you live outside Texas, check state laws and wildlife agency regulations regarding baiting before you proceed.

Once the pigs are on bait, the control method to be utilized dictates the best management practices to follow. Should you shoot or trap? That depends on the location and number of pigs.

Shooting

Once the pigs are verified to be on bait consistently, either by sign identification or camera, the shooter(s) can plan their approach to the site—always from downwind. If a camera has been used, the shooter can narrow down the time window and be much more efficient timewise, especially if several sounders of pigs have been trained onto multiple bait sites. Pop-up blinds are often set-up to serve as shooting stations downwind from bait sites. While some shooters opt for night vision equipment, simple solar powered landscape flood lights available for \$10 to \$20 at any hardware store can be placed toward the bait but facing in the opposite direction from where the shooter will approach. Garden t-posts or stakes can be employed to support the lights as needed. The lights cast soft illumination that does not spook the pigs yet is bright enough for the shooter to identify the target(s) through a typical rifle scope. Some landowners have successfully employed archery and crossbow equipment to reduce noise causing the pigs to spook from the bait site. Although they often leave upon the first arrow or bolt fired, they return to feed much sooner as compared to firearms that create more noise.



Solar-powered lights can be used to illuminate a bait site for night-time shooting.



A blind can be setup downwind from a baited site. Note pigs feeding at the site.

This technique is particularly efficient on large solitary boars that have proven difficult to trap. In fact, it is a method often used adjacent to a trap site where a sounder of pigs has already been removed by trapping and where the boars are consistently photo-captured but remained reluctant to enter the trap itself.



These two large boars would feed on bait but would not enter the adjacent trap. Note time and date.



Approximately 24 hours after the two boars were patterned, a shooter returned and successfully removed the 317 pound boar.

If a large sounder of pigs is documented at the bait site, the landowner may be better served to erect a trap rather than shoot into the sounder removing only one or a few pigs at a time. The hard part is over—the pigs are on bait and trapping can remove larger numbers as compared to shooting.

Trapping

Never, ever erect a corral trap until you have wild pigs consistently on bait! The bait site selection protocol is the same for trapping as previously described for shooting. This is where the use of a trail camera really pays off. Once the pigs are on bait, the sounder size dictates the corral trap size. Research has clearly shown that corral traps are more efficient at capturing wild pigs as compared to the smaller box traps.

Once the camera documents that pigs are consistently (meaning nightly) patterned on the bait, trap construction can begin. The minimum corral trap size that I recommend consists of four 20' by 5' tall panels (or equivalent) using 4" by 4" mesh with t-posts driven every 4' to 5' around the perimeter. If a large sounder (30 +) of pigs is identified on camera, a trap with as

many as 6 or even 8 panels may be necessary. The t-posts should be secured to the panels with smooth wire tied at the top, middle and bottom of the panels. Make sure there are no gaps between the bottom of the panels and the ground and always overlap the panels one mesh width at a t-post. I like to leave the opening for the gate at least 10' to 15' feet wide early in the baiting process. However, if a wide (8' +) gate is used, it can be set in place immediately, secured to the trap panels and locked open. While corral traps may take a few hours to erect, almost all of the components can be reused for other purposes around the farm or ranch once pig trapping has concluded.

At this stage, most bait is placed outside the opening or the gate but some can be placed in the throat of the trap where the gate will be or is located.



Note the large opening in this trap to encourage pigs to enter and consume bait that will be placed inside.



Note the line of bait extending from well outside to deep inside this trap as part of the pre-baiting process.

It may take several days for the pigs to accept the presence of the new trap. Once the pigs are back on bait, continue to progressively offer less bait on the outside and more inside the trap. As the pigs enter the trap consistently, you may want to move the camera to the back of the trap and record the pig activity as they enter through the gate opening.



A completed corral trap. Note panel placed over the top adjacent to the gate opening.



Pigs will initially feed up to the open gate but it may take several days for them to enter trap.



As the pigs begin to feed inside the trap, more bait is offered inside and less outside.



Pigs can be trained to accept the presence of a trap and begin to feed more inside over time.

As the pigs venture deeper into the trap, continue to reduce feeding outside and concentrate increasing amounts of bait toward the back of the trap where the trigger is routinely located. If a tire trigger is to be employed, go ahead and place the tire inside the trap so the pigs can become accustomed to its presence, eventually placing corn under and inside the tire itself so the pigs will equate it with food. If the throat of the trap was left splayed open, you can now set the gate in place with the door(s) locked open in order to train the pigs through the narrower opening. This may require placing bait both immediately outside and inside the gate threshold to encourage the pigs to enter the narrower opening.



Over time, concentrate baiting deeper inside the trap with a minimum of bait placed on the outside. The wider gate opening generally reduces the training time required.

Once the pigs are entering through the gate consistently, continue to concentrate most of the bait deep inside the trap. When the pigs are consistently entering the trap through the locked open gate, you get to pick the day that you can set the trap to catch.

Baiting a Trap to Catch

There should be no guesswork involved as to whether you are successful at catching pigs once the trap is set. If you have trained the pigs to bait and then to the bait inside the trap properly (all documented by camera), you should be virtually guaranteed to be successful!



Continue feeding in and around the trigger while monitoring by camera.



Placing bait inside the trap.

Late on the afternoon that you set the trap to catch, place bait in a horseshoe pattern around the inside of the trap, maybe two or three feet inside of the panels. If smaller pigs are in the sounder, they will go to this bait first. Place sufficient bait around the trigger used. This is where the tire used as a trigger really shines. (Small pigs are the first to go in a trap followed by the sows and younger boars with the larger boars in last—if they are even running with the sounder at all). Often mature boars show up at a bait site on a different time schedule than a sounder- unless a sow is in estrous. Bait is placed under, around and even inside the old tire that is tied to the tripwire trigger. Smaller pigs cannot easily move the tire, so tripping the trap is delayed until larger pigs are present. The idea is for the last pig to be inside the trap before the first pig trips the trigger releasing the gate. The larger the sounder of pigs, the greater distance needed between the gate and the trigger and therefore the more bait placed between the gate and trigger--which means employing a larger trap. The idea is for the sounder to feed their way methodically back to the trigger—not rush the trigger immediately upon entering the trap. The delay in tripping the gate works in your favor by allowing more time for the entire sounder to enter the trap before the gate is tripped.



Rooter stick trigger using a post hole that will be filled with bait. Smaller pigs root less than adults.



A tire trigger usually requires a larger pig to flip the tire in order to trip and close the gate.



A trip wire trigger is commonly used in corral traps but is more easily tripped by smaller pigs as compared to the tire and rooter stick trigger styles.



On the afternoon before setting the gate to catch, bait heavily around the trigger (left) and also place bait in a line around the inside of the trap to encourage all pigs to feed simultaneously (right).

The smaller pigs will eat the easily accessible corn first, while the adults will generally work their way to the bait at the trigger. As more bait is consumed by the sounder, more competition is created for the decreasing supply of bait. Eventually, the pigs are forced to start nosing the tire trigger to access more bait or digging into a posthole if a rooter trigger has been employed. Both of these triggers delay trap trip simply because the pigs have to “work harder” to get at the remaining bait. The tripwire is least sensitive of these three trigger types-- but can be adjusted height-wise to some degree in order to avoid being tripped by the smaller pigs in the sounder. As stated, feed placed between the gate and tripwire delays the pigs tripping the gate.

Plan to check the trap the next morning shortly after daylight. The longer you leave pigs in a trap, the more time they have to escape. If you have followed your protocol to this point, you should have pigs in the trap. So how long does this process take? In areas where the pigs have not been pressured and the correct bait sites are selected, we have gotten the pigs on bait as early as the first night, entering the trap within 5 days of initial baiting and captured in as little as a 7 to 10 days from start to finish. Be prepared for it to take much longer—a month is not unusual.



After pre-baiting and using best management practices, this sounder of 21 pigs was captured in less than two weeks. However, if additional pigs are photo-captured but not trapped, wire the gate open and start feeding outside the trap again with camera monitoring.

For absentee landowners that may visit their properties only occasionally or on weekends, employ a deer feeder (where legal) with a camera. However, the use of a feeder does restrict the bait choices that can be offered to shelled corn and perhaps a few other baits that funnel thru the feeder without stopping it up. I prefer to set the feeder to go off shortly after dusk and then again after midnight—in other words when pigs are likely to be the most active. One word of caution—be sure and stake the feeder legs in place, otherwise pigs can and will overturn the feeder and damage the mechanism. Once the camera confirms pigs on bait, erect the trap as described but position the feeder so it initially feeds both inside and outside the gate and then progressively only inside toward the back of the trap. These two devices used in tandem can take much of the guesswork out of the process but still allow the absentee landowner to effectively reduce pig numbers at their convenience.

If your camera data suggest that another sounder is present or not all the pigs in the sounder were actually captured, immediately lock the gate open and start the baiting process again. Sometimes AWOL pigs return immediately and sometimes it may take a week for them to re-appear after their comrades have been removed. In addition, pregnant sows that are regulars at the bait site often leave the sounder for a few weeks immediately before and after farrowing but should eventually return with their litters. Only careful monitoring of camera images/video and identification of pigs by color or coat pattern and numerical counts can reveal if all pigs were captured in one fell swoop or if follow-up trapping will be required.

Remember, we are not going to eradicate wild pigs in Texas with our current legal methods of control. However, we can effectively reduce the damage they cause by working smarter instead of harder!!

