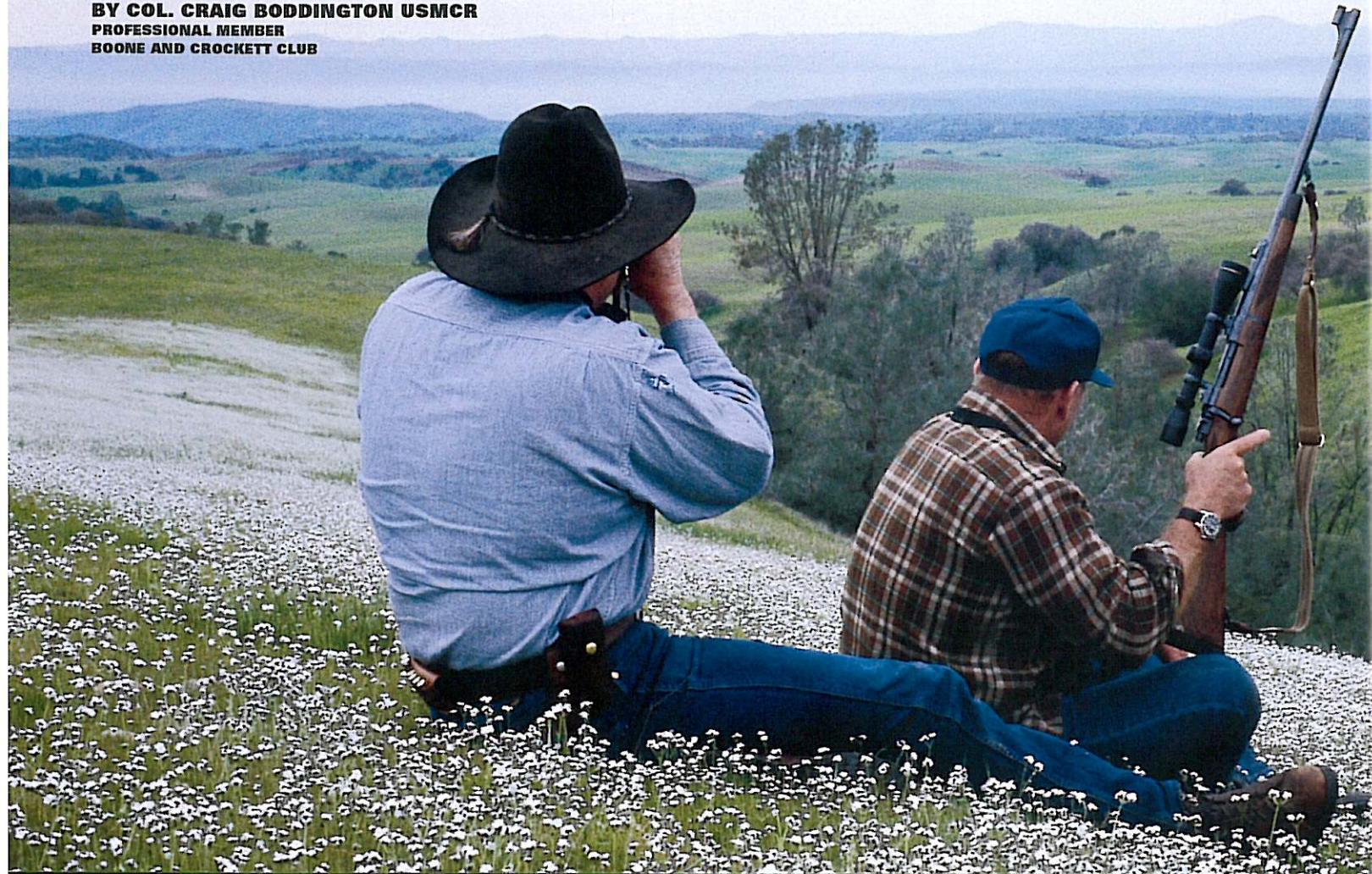


What's With a Fun

Our feral hogs will never be record-book animals, but they offer a fine year-'round hunting experience.

**BY COL. CRAIG BODDINGTON USMCR
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB**



Okay, let's start out with a riddle. Name me a game animal that:

- Occupies one of the largest ranges of any North American big game animal.**
- Is not a North American big game animal.**
- Is the most popular big game in our most populous state.**
- Is a recognized game animal (with seasons and licenses), yet can be hunted year round.**
- Is occasionally dangerous.**
- Is always good eating.**
- Is a whole lot of fun to hunt.**

The answer, of course, is the feral hog. The only part of the riddle that really matters is the last part, the fact that this animal, in a free-ranging state, offers a great hunting opportunity. But let's go through some basic facts.

Wrong Hunt?



PHOTOGRAPH BY © LON E. LAUBER

First off, please do not confuse the hunting of *free-ranging* wild hogs with the preserve hunting done in many parts of the country. Some fenced preserves offer pretty good hunting experiences and, regrettably, some do not. The pigs are probably much the same, but this article is about the hunting of free-ranging feral hogs. It is not precisely known exactly how far the wild hog has spread in North America, nor in all cases exactly where they came from. Most of this article will dwell on the situation on my home turf, California's Central Coast, but for the record, wild hogs are well-established, although spotty, in much of the Deep South from Texas to Florida and up through the Carolinas. They are found along a few rivers in New Mexico and up into southern Colorado, and they spill over from California into Oregon.

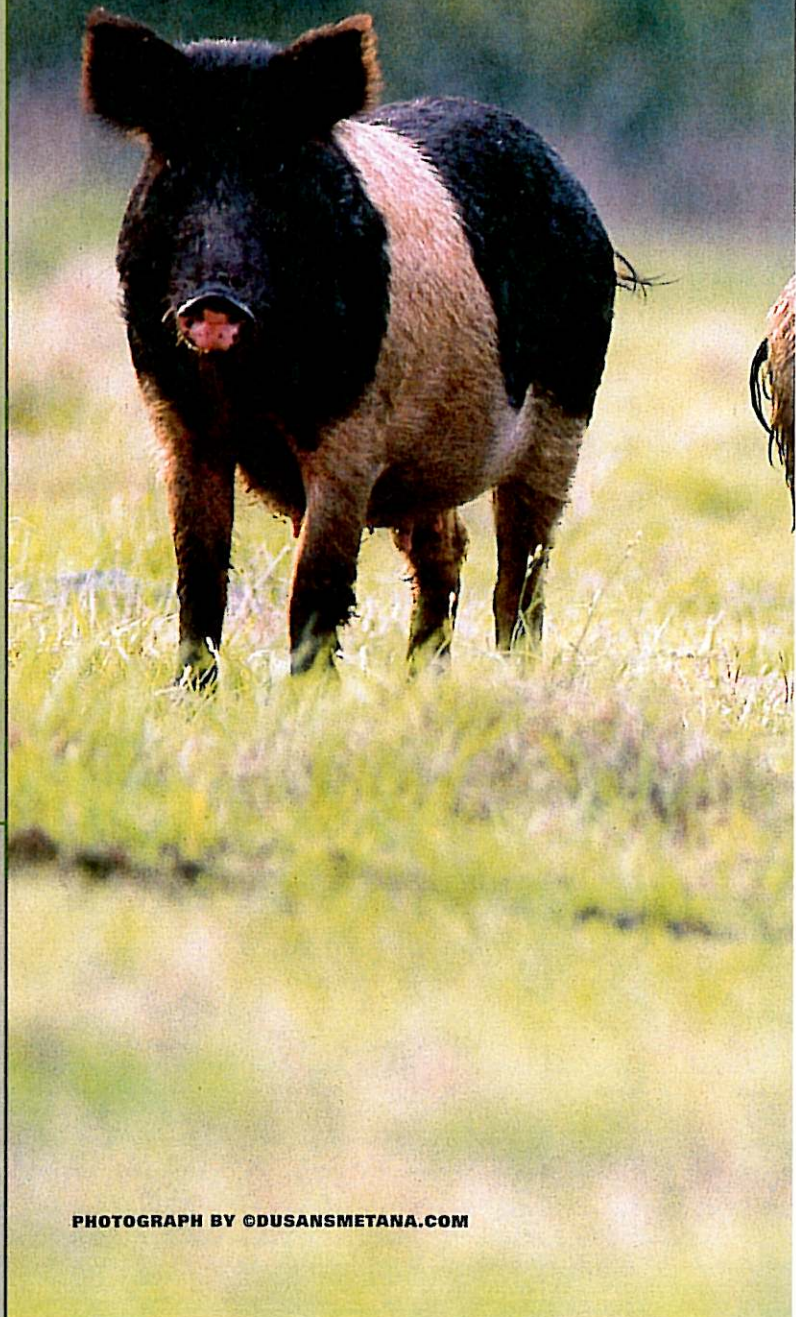
In California it is now believed that there are at least some feral hogs in every county, although the largest populations are found along the Central Coast and the northeastern edge of the San Joaquin Valley. Initially, they probably got started by the practice of letting domestic swine run free. It doesn't take many generations of living in the wild before the tail straightens, the ears become less floppy, and the animal streamlines with more powerful shoulders and less prominent hams. Some folks—hunters and outfitters—have attempted to glorify this animal by calling him a "wild boar," "Russian boar," "European boar," and (God help us) "Russian imperial boar." The truth is that all free-ranging wild hogs in North America are simply feral hogs, descendants of domestic swine adapted to living in the wild.

RIGHT: THE AUTHOR WITH A SPOTTED HOG HE TOOK WITH A .44 MAGNUM USING GARRETT HEAVY-BULLET LOADS. IF A MEAT HOG IS THE GOAL, IT'S BEST TO BE SELECTIVE AND REMOVE THE ODD-COLORED PIGS. THEY TASTE EVERY BIT AS GOOD!

BELOW: ANY GOOD DEER CARTRIDGE IS FINE FOR PIGS, BUT DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THEM. I LIKE MEDIUM CALIBERS WITH HEAVY BULLETS. LEFT TO RIGHT: .35 REMINGTON, .348 WINCHESTER, .356 WINCHESTER, .358 WINCHESTER, .35 WHELEN, .444 MARLIN, AND .45-70.



MOST U.S. POPULATIONS TODAY ARE A MIXTURE OF SOME FERAL DOMESTIC HOG WITH A LITTLE EUROPEAN WILD BOAR, SO A WIDE VARIETY OF COLOR COMBINATIONS OCCUR.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ©DUSANSMETANA.COM



What's Wrong With a Fun Hunt?

What they look like depends on what they descended from locally, with some areas having a lot of belted and spotted hogs and some areas a lot of red-colored hogs. Pure black hogs are generally considered the most appealing “trophies,” although, depending somewhat on time of year and diet, they all seem to provide about the same quality of pork (which is excellent). I think the dark colors tend to be more dominant, but I am certain the genuine European wild boar is a dominant strain.

The European wild boar, *Sus scrofa*, is conspecific with the domestic wild hog. In other words, they’re the same animal—except there are differences. The true European wild boar has multi-colored hairs, giving it a grizzled effect at maturity—and the young are striped, not solid or spotted. In an effort to enhance the appearance of the feral hogs, genuine pure European wild hogs, were released in several areas over the years, including along the Central Coast where I live. I’m about fifteen miles inland from Hearst Castle, and at one time William Randolph Hearst owned and hunted a lot of this area. Thanks to him there’s a good herd of aoudad and a small but persistent herd of Himalayan tahr along the coast, and every now and then one hears stories of zebra and sambar stag wandering around. Hearst evidently released quite a few European wild boar, and the strain is apparently dominant enough that the effects have been far-reaching up and down the coast. We still have a few belted and spotted hogs, but uniformly dark pigs are more the norm in my area—and many look absolutely no different than the “genuine” wild pigs I’ve hunted in Europe.

One of my best friends, Mike Ballew, used to manage a hunting operation for the big Dye Creek Ranch on the western slopes of Mount Lassen. At that time the Dye Creek pig population averaged about 1,200 animals, and they were “purely” feral at the start of Mike’s tenure. He introduced just a few pure European hogs. Of equal importance, all of his pig hunts (average harvest 250 to 350 per year) were guided, and hunters desiring “meat pigs” were always steered to off-color

pigs. Over the course of just a decade I could see a tremendous difference in the Dye Creek pigs, with belted and spotted hogs becoming downright scarce, and pigs with the “true European” appearance ever more common.

No matter the appearance, wild hogs in North America are at their very best some mixture of pure European and pure domestic strains. They are “feral hogs,” definitely non-native, and in many cases destructive creatures that shouldn’t be there at all. Except that they are. I am certainly not lobbying for them to be considered trophy game by Boone & Crockett’s Records Committee! But since they’re here, we might as well enjoy the bounty. In California the wild hogs are well enough established that they received legal status as a game animal many years ago—and in terms of hunter participation, have long been a more important game animal than deer. More recently a system of tags was instituted, primarily as a means of tracking the population (residents buy their tags in books of five for \$7.50; non-residents, always discriminated against, buy them one at time for \$12.50).

In the twenty-odd years that I’ve hunted these hogs the season has always been year round, and so stated in the regulations. Traditionally the bag limit was one per day, no sex or size restrictions. In most of California today there is no bag limit, excepting that a license is required and every pig must be tagged. I’m not altogether sure why the bag limit was removed, but part of the reason may have been to help discourage the pigs from spreading into areas not yet occupied. Aside from competition with both native game and domestic livestock, pigs’ rooting is hard on the land, and pigs are hard on fences. Landowners who don’t have them don’t want them, but there seems very little that can be done to stop their spread!

Me, I love ‘em. The county to my north, Monterey County, and my own county, San Luis Obispo County, are consistently the two counties with the highest harvest, so I’m right in the middle of the best pig country in the state. Where else in North America could I find a year-round season on tough, challenging, tasty,

and occasionally dangerous game? In my business, I have my own built-in bullet-testing laboratory in the hills I can see from my house!

Tough? You bet. Our California pigs live in harsh country that is dry much of the year, so they don’t grow to the extreme size I hear about in Texas and the Southeast. But at maturity our boars will weigh from about 180 to occasionally 300 pounds, and like all boars will develop a thick, armor-like gristle plate over the neck and shoulders. This plate will not turn a bullet—but it can cause thin-jacketed bullets to set up prematurely. Whether boar or sow, the wild hog is a hardy and tenacious creature—and thick hide coupled with the pig’s layers of fat restricts blood loss. Our thick chaparral, where a man can hardly crawl, is always nearby, so shot placement with a very adequate cartridge is essential.

Challenging? Like all game, this depends on the circumstances. We have a lot of wild hogs right now, so under most conditions I expect a couple of days of pig hunting to be productive. But keep in mind that any pig is legal game, and in many parts of the United States one might expect equal success on an “any deer” deer hunt or an “any elk” elk hunt. It’s a whole lot more difficult, and the success is much lower, if you set out in search of a fully mature boar with big tusks—and lower still if (as with black bears) you limit the colors you find acceptable. It takes several years for a pig to mature, so genuine trophy boars with, say, three inches of thick lower tusk showing above the gum are rare. They occur, but I wouldn’t give anybody good odds of seeing one on a given hunt of a couple of days duration.

Of course, it depends on the day. Last June gunmaker John Lazzaroni brought out a couple of toys for then editor at *Hunting*, Greg Tinsley, and me. On the same weekend, hunting with local outfitter Kyler Hamman, both Greg and I took two of the best pigs I’ve seen in many years. On the other hand, the managing editor of *Fair Chase*, Julie Tripp, came up about a year ago, and in the exact same country we were unable to get her a shot in two days of hard hunting. My taxidermist friend, Gilbert Gomez, prob-

What's Wrong With a Fun Hunt?

SUNRISE OVER CALIFORNIA'S CENTRAL COAST. THIS IS OUR WILD HOG COUNTRY, RANCLAND THAT IS CALLED "OAK GRASSLAND" HABITAT, ROLLING HILLS WITH A VARIETY OF COVER.



GUIDE KYLER HAMMAN GETS HIS HUNTER SET UP ON A NICE MEAT HOG FEEDING IN SUMMER BARLEY.

LEFT: IN THE EARLY MORNING WE SET UP ON HILLTOPS AND GLASS FOR PIGS MOVING FROM FEED TO BEDDING GROUNDS. AFTERNOON HUNTS (BELOW) ARE JUST THE OPPOSITE; WE SET UP CLOSER TO BEDDING COVER - USUALLY DENSE CHAPARRAL HILLSIDES - AND HOPE TO CATCH PIGS COMING OUT TO FEED.



PAUL STOCKWELL AND THE AUTHOR WITH A GOOD BOAR TAKEN A DOZEN YEARS AGO. THIS ONE IS MEMORABLE BECAUSE HE GOT IN THE BRUSH AND GAVE ME ONE OF THE CLOSEST CALLS I'VE EVER HAD WITH A WILD ANIMAL. PIGS ARE NOT REALLY DANGEROUS, BUT YOU MUSTN'T TAKE CHANCES WITH THEM.



**What's Wrong
With a Fun Hunt?**



JOHN LAZZERONI, GREG TINSLEY, AND THE AUTHOR WITH A VERY FINE BOAR, WHAT WE CALL A "TOOTH FIG." THIS IS A GREAT TROPHY; A BOAR LIKE THIS IS FAIRLY HARD TO COME BY.

ably thinks our pigs are mythical; he's been up three times (although for very short hunts) in the last 18 months and hasn't yet taken home pork. But this is unusual. Unless a hunter is dead-set on a very large boar of a particular color, most pig hunts along the coast are successful—but sometimes you can't be real choosy, and sometimes you have to cover an awful lot of ground.

Neither of which is a bad thing. A prime sow is a whole lot better eating than a rank old boar, and I figured out a long time ago that you can't eat the tusks. And if you have to hunt hard, so much the better. The California coast is beautiful country, and the weather is usually wonderful.

Dangerous? Well, not really. I hate writers who sensationalize this kind of thing, so most of the time I figure the genuine danger from a wild hog to be about on a par with the chances of being charged by a rogue caribou. Except pigs do have exceptionally

sharp teeth, and they know how to use them because they fight all the time. They are generally shy creatures with poor eyesight but superb hearing and wonderfully keen noses, and if they detect humans their natural reaction is to vacate fast. But this is caution, not fear. There is no natural predator, including a mountain lion, which can touch a mature wild hog, so they know no real fear. If a wounded pig gets into the thick stuff, then it is very likely to stand its ground—and the danger can shift from very, very remote to very real and immediate.

Most of the guys who get in trouble with wild hogs are houndsmen, because they wind up very close in stuff too thick to shoot without endangering the dogs. I prefer to avoid hound hunting because in our country spot-and-stalk hunting is practical and a whole lot more fun. Also, we can hunt pigs in feeding areas day after day and they will return . . . but run dogs through their bedding grounds, and

you won't see those pigs for a long time. In spot-and-stalk hunting you generally don't crawl into the really thick stuff unless you have a wounded pig to deal with, and this is a genuinely dangerous undertaking. Just last year Kyler Hamman, who is a very good and careful hunter, had a client run over by a wounded hog in thick cover. They were lucky. The man took a tusk through a bicep and needed a few stitches, but no permanent damage. I've actually had two very close calls with wild hogs—which is more than I've had with quite a few bears and several dozen Cape buffalo. So I can't call them truly dangerous, but they have my full respect.

The main thing about our hogs, though, is that they're just a whole lot of fun, especially hunting by spot-and-stalk the way we do it. A lot of hunters who come here have an altogether different notion of pig hunting, often based on a less-than-ideal experience in a fenced preserve somewhere. In my little area alone we have sev-

eral full-time outfitters who offer two-day spot-and-stalk hunts for wild pigs. Others offer day hunts or hunts with dogs, also very productive (maybe more productive!), but I like the idea of at least a couple of days to see the country and the pigs, especially for hunters from afar.

Whether you're hunting with Kyler Hamman's Boaring Experiences, Tom and August Harden's Cross Canyon Outfitters, Doug Roth's Camp Five Outfitters, or whomever, most pig hunts start before dawn somewhere on a high ridge. The idea is to find pigs starting to move from feed toward bedding cover, then figure out how to get ahead of them. In late evening it is reversed. You keep your eyes on bedding cover and routes from the heavy chaparral to known feeding and watering areas, in the hopes that pigs will appear close enough or with enough daylight remaining so you can intercept.

This scenario varies but little throughout the year . . . but how it plays out changes radically with the season. In cooler months, say November through April, the pigs are out a whole lot longer. On cloudy days they may even stay out feeding and rooting around all day long, so your hunting day is very long. In the spring we start to get rain and everything greens up, making it a wonderfully mild and beautiful time to hunt. Except that, with the new green, there is food everywhere and the pigs are scattered to the four winds. It's still cool enough that they can be out through much of the day, but they could be almost anywhere. This is a great time to hunt, but a difficult time to find pigs, and usually you'll have to cover a lot of ground.

'Long about July the barley starts to come up. Barley is a traditional crop in our area, and part of the reason why the pigs have done so well. Actually, in past years, with a lot more ground in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and less ground in barley, our pigs haven't done as well! But with CRP funding diminishing, more ground is going back into barley and the pigs have responded wonderfully. In the summertime it gets brutally hot, so the hunting day is

quite short and this would seem a terrible time to hunt pigs.

Actually it might be the very best time. We always get a good coastal breeze, so the evening cools down quickly and even in July and August a jacket is required in the early morning. During this time of the year the barley will be headed up, and this is like a narcotic for pigs. They will be in the barley fields all night long. The hunting day is very short, but in the morning you have a couple of hours to waylay them coming out of the barley. In the evening they may not come out of their bedding cover until just before dark—but they will come out, and they will be headed toward barley. As a local, I tend to like the summer hunting because the pigs are so concentrated . . . and a couple of hours in the morning and evening leaves the day free for work or whatever. For nonresidents, well, it's just too hot (and also counterproductive) to wander the hills during the heat of the day. We've got some good ground squirrel shooting, and plenty of wineries to visit (provided an evening hunt isn't in the plans!), but regardless of how productive, summer hunting is really just an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. So the soft months of late winter and early spring, December through April, are probably the best time for visitors to hunt pigs, with weather usually wonderful and the hunting day very long. But you need more time in these months, because the pigs can be widely scattered.

Perhaps the greatest negative to our pig hunting is that it isn't very democratic. We don't have a great deal of public land in my part of the world, but even if we did the things that pigs want most—permanent water and agriculture—are on private land, not public. While our farmers tend to hate pigs with passionate fervor, they don't hate them enough to let strangers with rifles roam their lands! Unless you know someone very well, the only way to ensure a good experience is to choke it up and call one of our several local outfitters. Just like elsewhere in the West, Chambers of Commerce in Central Coast towns like Paso Robles, Atascadero, or

King City are good places to start. (Yes, pig hunting is enough of a local business that some outfitters are Chamber members in good standing!) Actually, although I have a couple of private spots that occasionally produce, when I have friends coming into town who want pigs I do exactly that—choke it up and call a local outfitter. Prices are extremely reasonable as fully guided hunts go, and the very best and biggest ranches in our area are almost invariably under lease to one or another of the local outfitters.

That's the down side. At its best our wild hog hunting is not "free hunting" as we Americans so often believe we deserve. But it sure is fun. Some days I might go out and see only one or two pigs at a distance and draw a blank; on another day in the same area I might see dozens of pigs. Usually somebody knows what they're eating and what they're doing, but they can surprise you—that is why our local outfitters are extremely successful on two-day hunts, but hate to bank on one-day hunts. Once you find them you have to get to them, which can mean a lung-busting scramble to intercept a herd, or a fast shot in failing light.

I try to keep the freezer at least partway filled with pork chops and the jalapeno-cheddar sausage our area is famous for, but I usually don't shoot a pig unless I have a gun or a bullet that needs proving. On the other hand, I never tire of hunting the darned things, so I do a fair amount of ride-alongs with my outfitter friends. Our pigs are not nearly as difficult to stalk as any deer, but they offer great lessons in stalking, and some of the very best lessons in shot placement. No, even though we think of them as genuine game animals, I don't want to see this or any other non-native species creep its way into our records system. But just because they aren't legitimate, that doesn't mean they don't offer good, genuinely fair chase hunting—a great opportunity for beginners to learn, experts to keep their skills sharp, and for all hunters to enjoy their sport at times of the year when there isn't a whole lot going on. I like my California wild hogs, and I'm not the least bit ashamed of it! ▲ ▲ ▲