

Feral hogs ruffle feathers of ground-nesting birds

Along with the other damage they do, feral hogs can negatively affect populations of ground-nesting birds by eating both them and their eggs, such as the quail eggs pictured above. (Texas AgriLife Extension Service photo)

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COLLEGE STATION — Landowners in the Plum Creek Watershed area and elsewhere in the state should be aware that feral hogs not only damage crops and pastures, but also have a negative impact on ground-nesting birds, according to Texas AgriLife Extension Service experts.

“Typically, feral hogs are not thought of as predators, but they fill that role as well,” said Dr. Jim Cathey, AgriLife Extension wildlife specialist in College Station. “They are opportunistic omnivores, eating whatever plant or animal matter is available as they compete with other wildlife for food sources.”

Cathey said that means ground-nesting birds, like northern bobwhite quail and wild turkey, along with their eggs, are often on the feral hogs’ menu.

“For an animal that keeps its nose close to the ground, these birds’ nests can be especially vulnerable,” he said.

The northern bobwhite has been declining over much of its historic range in Texas for several decades, according to Dr. Dale Rollins, an AgriLife Extension wildlife specialist in San Angelo.

To better understand predation of northern bobwhite nests, Rollins has been teaming up with landowners and AgriLife Extension agents to monitor predation rates in the Rolling Plains area of the state, using simulated bobwhite nests to help determine the extent of feral hog predation.

Rollins said during trials conducted in 1993 and 1994, he and the other participants found that on a ranch in Foard County 23.5 percent of the simulated bobwhite nests he and others set out were consumed by feral hogs. They also found that 11.5 percent of simulated nests they had set out on a ranch in Shackelford County were depredated by feral hogs.

“This suggests that nest predation by feral hogs is conceivably a contributing factor to the northern bobwhite population decline,” Rollins said. “And those experiments were conducted nearly 20 years ago, so the feral hog populations have increased substantially since that time.”

Cathey noted that three subspecies of wild turkey are found in Texas, with the most common being the Rio Grande subspecies followed by the eastern subspecies.

“Researchers have documented nest predation by feral hogs for each of these birds,” Cathey said. “The eastern subspecies was extirpated in much of its Texas range, typically east of the Trinity River. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department reintroduced eastern wild turkey with hopes of re-establishing the population.”

He said the Gus Engeling Wildlife Management Area between Palestine and Corsicana was one location where these turkeys were released.

“To monitor movement and nest success, these turkeys were fitted with radio transmitters and nests were located and observed,” Cathey said. “Observations showed that feral hogs, among other predators, consumed eggs from nests.”

In a previous attempt to increase nesting success among ground-nesting birds, Texas Parks and Wildlife



staff also increased control of feral hogs. They discovered that in 1998, when only 68 hogs were removed, the nest success was zero percent. But in 1999, when control was increased and a total of 313 feral hogs were removed just before the nesting season, the nest success rate increased to 25 percent.

“While feral hogs are not the only nest predators of wild turkeys, this research suggested an effect where reducing or driving feral hogs from the area increased nest success,” Cathey said. “Other 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 successful ranch management.”

He noted that landowners should utilize several control methods for feral hogs, which may include trapping, snaring, shooting, use of dogs and hunting.

“Given the high reproductive rate of feral hogs, many more native wildlife species are likely impacted,” he said. “The bottom line is that native wildlife species need a reprieve and this can be provided through aggressive feral hog reduction.”

To help landowners in the Plum Creek Watershed and other areas of the state understand more about feral hogs and the methods used to manage them, AgriLife Extension has developed publications in English and Spanish that can be downloaded at no charge. To view and/or download these publications, go to the Plum Creek Watershed Partnership website at <http://plumcreek.tamu.edu/feralhogs>.

The site also contains an on-line tool for reporting feral hog sightings or control measures, with one report for cooperating landowners and another for the general public.

For more information on feral hogs in the Plum Creek Watershed area, contact AgriLife Extension assistant Jared Timmons at 254-485-4886 or jbtimmons@ag.tamu.edu.

Funding and support for the development of the Plum Creek Watershed Protection Plan is provided through a Clean Water Act §319(h) nonpoint source grant from the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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