



# Foothills

## Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

### Wild Pigs in the Foothills

It's been a while since wild pigs were sighted in Open Space, but they were a problem in Foothills Park in the 1980s, and it's possible they will be again. These mammals are a cross between the European wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) and escaped domestic swine. European wild boar were introduced to Monterey County, California in 1926. From there they quickly expanded their territory. In Monterey County many domestic pigs escaped during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and became established in the wild as feral pigs. Thereafter, wild boars and feral pigs began to interbreed. Now wild pigs can be found throughout California.

The pigs visiting the foothills are hybrids and may share the physical traits of both ancestors. A purebred European wild boar is about three feet long. It is covered with stiff bristly hairs, which are mostly blackish brown, mixed with some yellow. A band of longer hairs runs down the back. The ears are held erect and are quite hairy. The young of wild boars have longitudinal stripes, a trait that is seldom seen in feral domestic swine.

Pigs mature quickly, and it is known that a female can breed as young as six months. The peak breeding time is between October and January. After a gestation period of four months, the sow digs a nest in the ground and lines it with grass and branches. The average litter size is four to five, yet litters can be as large as 14. The piglets, which are about six to eight inches long at birth, stay with the mother until the following spring.

Wild boars are mature at 1-1/2 years, and usually reach their maximum growth at age 5 or 6. The average lifespan of a wild boar is 15 to 25 years. They have few natural enemies, and thus their numbers can increase rapidly. Humans are the chief enemy of wild pigs, although mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, and golden eagles do take some of the young.



Pigs are nomadic, wandering in search of food and water. Once they find food, they stay in the area until the food is diminished or the animals are disturbed. Being omnivorous (like humans), the pigs' diet is greatly varied. Some significant food items include grass, forbs (broad-leaved flowering plants), some cultivated grain, acorns, berries, fruit, leaves, bulbs, roots, carrion, earthworms and insects. They can cause extensive damage to the ground by uprooting the soil in search of food. Along with destroying turf, the pigs also forage along hillsides, which can lead to problems with erosion during the rainy season.

Park rangers began noticing increasing signs of pigs in the Park in the fall of 1988. These signs included destroyed turf, and uprooted soil and leaves under the buckeye trees. When signs of the pigs showed up again in November of 1989, the rangers were ready. Working in cooperation with the Santa Clara County staff, live traps were set with the hope of catching the pigs. Trapping went on for three seasons without success. Pigs are very intelligent and these pigs were able to get to the bait without being caught. Despite the attempted trapping, the pigs still return each autumn. Even so, the pig population never seems to increase. It is most likely their numbers are kept down by their natural predators and by poachers. Lately, a truce has been declared between the pigs and the rangers. The pigs have stopped damaging the developed parts of the park, and the rangers have stopped their trapping.

*By Susan Kocher Massey  
Edited by Kathleen Jones  
Illustrated by Virginia Kolence*

