

In my backyard: Javelinas - No Porky Pig

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Once, eons ago, when my middle sister, Charlene, was just a teenager, she went dove hunting with her boyfriend. At some point they got separated and she thought the quick way back to the pickup was through a dry arroyo. As she walked down the sandy creek bed she heard a thundering sound that grew louder by the second. She looked back over her shoulder and to her dismay, saw a herd of javelinas running down the wash towards her. She had heard stories from our dad about being jumped by angry javelinas while hunting deer as a boy, and she picked up her pace, looking for a spot to get out of the arroyo. But the walls were steep and too high



and there was no escape, so she began to run down the dry wash, with the javelinas gaining by the second. Now she could hear grunting by the big ones in the lead and she began to fear for her safety...they were going to catch up, and then what? She spied a slim mesquite tree sprouting up out of the creek bottom, way too small for her tall frame, but it was her only hope. Just as the herd got to her heels she shinnied up the mesquite, with it swaying back and forth, ready to snap. As the big males in the lead ran under her dangling feet, they gnashed their tusks with a clacking noise, barely missing her. In seconds she watched as mothers with babies ran by, and then they were gone. The next time she went hunting she kept an escape route in mind, not wanting to get caught again.

If you look at javelinas grazing on the side of the road you wouldn't think they were capable of carnage and mayhem, but that is exactly what would happen, especially if piglets are present. Males and females are very protective of babies in the herd, and you'd better watch out! The tusks sharpen themselves every time they open and close their mouths, and consequently, become very sharp, dangerous weapons. Lately, people in South America have been seriously injured or killed by large herds of javelinas.

Although javelinas, or collared peccaries as they are officially known, look like pigs, they are only distantly related to domesticated pigs. The name "peccary" is derived from the Carib Indian word "pakira." Domestic pigs came with colonists to America from Europe, but originated in Africa and Asia and are called Old World Pigs. Javelinas come from a subgroup called peccaries, and they have different characteristics than pigs. The canine teeth of pigs are curved and long, whereas javelina teeth are shorter and straight. The javelina walks on two toes like pigs, but unlike pigs, the other toes are usually missing. They also have a pig-like snout and small, pig-like eyes. Javelinas are not ruminates but do have a very complex 3-chambered stomach. They can average about three or four feet in length with a large male weighing up to 90 or 100 pounds. They grunt and squeal like pigs and have a similar social behavior.

Javelinas are omnivores, meaning that like humans they eat all kinds of food. They will eat seeds, fruit, grasses and roots, but especially love prickly pear cactus, and in our country one of the few animals that can eat lecheguilla without being poisoned. They use those sharp tusks to crush seeds and slice through roots and plant material, and they can decimate a patch of prickly pear or lecheguilla overnight. But, being omnivores, they also will eat small animals and carrion. I have seen them feeding on deer and rabbits killed on the highway.

Javelinas are social animals and will gather in herds of 8 to 15 animals, although I have seen larger groups. There is safety in numbers and they use their groups to protect from predators, defend territory, keep the herd warm and for social interactions. Their territory ranges from 75 to 700 acres, or a little over 1 square mile, although in our wide open spaces and thin vegetation, their range might be larger.

One of the less palatable things about javelinas is their body odor. With scent glands below their eyes and on their backs, they give off a stench that has won them the name "skunk pig." Years ago I carpentered on a hunting lodge south of Elephant Mountain and the ranch road man had two pet javelinas he raised from piglets. They were very rank smelling, but so friendly you couldn't avoid them, like two pet dogs. But let an illegal come into camp, or a dark-skinned person, and their hackles would fly up and they would be all over the intruder. Funny critters, but unpredictable!

Predation of javelinas is limited to larger wild cats, mountain lions and coyotes, animals big enough to take one down. Baby javelinas are susceptible, but the fierce defense of parents and other herd members gives them ample protection. The only other predator is human, but more for sport than for food. My friends who eat javelina meat tell me it is very tasty (I suppose especially with fava beans and a fine Chianti.) They claim it is all in the preparation, but that can remain their little secret. I won't be trying javelina (or rattlesnake, for that matter) anytime soon.

Javelinas (Collared Peccaries) are one of four peccary species found in the New World. They range from the American Southwest down into Central America and across the Isthmus of Panama into South America. The White-lipped Peccary is found in Central and South America, the Chacoan Peccary is found in Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina and the Giant Peccary is found in the Brazilian Amazon and Bolivia.

Peccaries appeared in the fossil record almost 50 Million years ago in the Old World, but disappeared almost 15 million years ago, probably because of competition from pigs arriving from Africa and Asia. They had already spread to North America before going extinct in Europe, but only arrived in South America about 3 or 4 million years ago, after the Isthmus of Panama arose and connected the two continents. Animals such as llamas and tapirs, which are common in South America today, arrived from North America with the peccaries. At the same time ground sloths and opossums migrated up into North America. Now llamas and tapirs are gone from North America, as well as ground sloths, which were huge beasts.

One of the problems we face in Sanderson is the arrival of javelinas to eat fallen pecans and root through gardens and cactus patches. I always make a lot of noise when I go outside if I know they are present. Loud noise usually drives them away. The last thing I want to do is end up shredded by an angry mom or dad!

And what's in your backyard?