

HILLSBORO JAVELINA HISTORY

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Javelina, or if you please, collared peccaries are very much a presence in Hillsboro. As might be expected the town citizens have differing feelings toward them, although our populace is more tolerant of them than other places I've lived. Personally, I have a certain fondness for the little beasts, even though I've had to have four different dogs stitched up after encounters with them over the years. I also had to have my own leg stitched up after a feisty little pig grabbed me while I was helping on a pen study of peccaries at the University of Arizona. This incident gave me immediate membership into the unofficial Order of the Purple Pig made up of biologists dumb enough to allow themselves to be bitten by a peccary. In my case, I was pouring pellets a feeding hopper and the ungrateful sow reached through a protective gate and sunk her canines just above my right knee. The damage wasn't all that serious, I healed, and now, at my venerable age, there's cachet in telling the tale. Over the years I helped with various peccary projects, including catching them in wooden traps and darting them with tranquilizer guns. I also did a bit of low-level chopper time counting them.

One of my earliest projects, as a student assistant to Dr. Lyle Sowls who became known as a peccary authorityⁱ, involved dumping capsules of colored glass beads down the throats of trapped peccaries. I then spent weeks wandering the foothills around

Tucson, breaking up peccary poop, hoping to learn how far the mistreated pigs had traveled from the trap site. I never found any beads, but I can definitely identify pig poop and tell you where they put their latrines.

But back to Hillsboro. From all I can learn, peccaries, like the white-winged doves I discussed a while back, are pretty recent arrivals in town, so I can consider them a suitable

subject of history. After a quick literature review on the creature, tempered by some 50 years experience in wildlife biology, I'm once again reminded that one should



never predict the fate of a species. In 1927, J. Stokley Ligon, one of New Mexico's earliest and most respected biologists, wrote:

"Peccaries formerly occupied suitable range on a narrow zone all along the southern border of the state, from Arizona to the Texas line, east of the Pecos. They have, however, been persistently hunted and killed until only a few remain. They are now most numerous in the extreme southwestern corner of the State and a few survive in the sand country, east of Carlsbad, where they were formally abundant. These strange and interesting animals should be well protected. If not given absolute protection, their extermination seems inevitable. In addition to conserving the few remaining peccaries in refuges, a close [sic] season of from four to six years is recommended.

". . . Even where little molested by man, they probably would not become abundant on their limited New Mexico range."ⁱⁱ

Javelina were so scarce in 1927 that Ligon didn't bother to put a map of their distribution in his book, although he displayed maps of every other big game species in the state.

I rather imagine that most current Hillsboro residents would now take issue with Stokley's prediction. These little wild pigs are here full time. Given a chance they can be devastating to gardens and flower beds. And they're not above latching on to any dog that gets too close. Given their tendency to both bite and slash with their 2-inch tusks, damage to an overly brave *perro or perra* can be severe, often requiring stitches to hold their hide together until it heals.

Over the 82 years that have passed since Ligon warned of the demise of the peccary, the species has expanded its range widely in New Mexico, as well as throughout the southwestern United States. The expansion has been incremental over time, consistently accompanied by overly-conservative predictions. In 1975, the authors of *Mammals of New Mexico*ⁱⁱⁱ wrote:

". . . The southeastern population, which was centered in the sandy country east of the Pecos, was early reduced and perhaps eliminated, and the southwestern population was also low. However, in recent years the southwestern peccaries have become common and have spread through Hildago County, east to the Tres Hermanas in Luna County, and north into the Gila and San Francisco drainages."

These authors note a sighting of a single javelina west of Carlsbad Caverns National Park in 1954. Their map for the species shows solidly documented records only in the boot heel of extreme southwest New Mexico. They show very limited potential, but unoccupied, habitat along the lower Rio Grande and Pecos Rivers and in the Guadalupe Mountains.

By 1993, the New Mexico Game and Department reported:

"Biologists believe that javelina have expanded their range in this century, as scattered herds can be seen in Catron, Dona Ana, Sierra, and Socorro counties."^{iv} In 2004, biologists were reporting multiple sightings as far north as Zuni and the Malpais National Conservation Area.^v

These are the most recent records I've found, but if New Mexico peccaries have paralleled those in Arizona, I suspect that the animals are showing up at other parts of the Land of Enchantment. When I hunted javelina in Arizona as a teenager (early 1950s), we never thought of looking much north of Phoenix for the little pigs. By 1967 we were seeing them around Flagstaff. They have now reached the south rim of the Grand Canyon and biologists wonder how long it will be before they find their way across the Colorado and on to the Arizona Strip.

I won't go into the biology of the species here. Anyone wanting to know more about the critter can look up one or more of the references given below. My main goal here is to point out, once again, that wildlands and wildlife have histories, too. Things change, with or without the help of humans. What has brought on this continued shift in peccary distribution? Effective game law enforcement? Changing global climate? Both of these and more? I for one won't speculate, nor will I predict whether or not the trend will continue. Our historic views of species show that nature, is infinitely variable and too complex to predict. Waiting and watching is more enjoyable.



Drawing of Collared Peccary (aka Javelina) by James J. Audubon - 1844
Range Map Courtesy of Wikipedia (Kullanıcı:Mskyrider)