

Wild crop busters

By PAM GOLDEN

WHITE-TAILED deer and feral hogs that look at row-crop fields like feed troughs are getting the better of Southeast farmers.

Hogs can dig up an entire field in one night. They especially like corn. Populations explode because gilts start breeding at 6 months and can have two litters of eight each year after that. It takes a big blackboard to run those numbers.

Deer are more subtle. They eat 5 to 9 pounds of dry matter each day — or 1,810 to 3,258 pounds in a year. They also start breeding at 6 months and generally have one to two fawns a year.

Frustrated farmers can be encouraged by wildlife management experts who say these yield-busting trespassers can be controlled. The discouraging side of the story is ridding a field requires perseverance — and the solutions aren't permanent.

"It's going to take some work," says Mark Smith, Auburn University

Extension wildlife management specialist. "You're going to have to go full bore at it, if you will."

One of the most effective approaches is to enlist neighboring landowners in the effort. That cooperation sometimes is easier to get with feral hogs than deer.

"That's where education comes in," Smith says.

"You've got to sit down with your neighbors and talk to them about where you're going," says Joel Martin of Auburn University's Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center.

Biologically, deer populations are healthier when doe to buck populations are near a 2-1 ration. Extension personnel can help with biological information and wildlife best management practices.

That approach, of course, only is necessary when harvest is used to control populations. Practices other than harvest include fences and scare tactics. Neither is effective for long periods.

"Copper and lead is the most effective deer management strategy you have," Martin says.



POOR-MAN'S HOG TRAP: Since feral hogs generally do their worst damage at night, a trap baited with sour corn can pull them in for a landowner to harvest in the morning. Materials for this trap cost about \$200.

Stop feral hogs with drop-door trap

A baited trap works well to grab feral hogs and hold them for harvest. Materials for a trap cost about \$200. Once in there, a bullet behind the ear finishes the job.

"Every one of you can do this," Auburn University wildlife management specialist Chris Jaworowski told a roomful of frustrated farmers recently. "It's not hard."

Jaworowski favors 5-foot-high panels on traditional drop-door traps. He goes with 5-foot panels because he's seen hogs jump out. Generally, he doesn't put in wire bottoms.

"I've seen some hogs who just won't walk on that wire," Jaworowski says. "They don't like it."

In Alabama, no live wildlife can be removed from property, says Lt. Frank Reid, an Alabama wildlife conservation officer. For other states, check with a wildlife officer or call the state agency.

Reid, however, agrees that trapping hogs is the best way to reduce populations.

"But you need to kill them on the property," he says. "If you want to feed out hogs, build a pen on the property. You cannot take them from your property alive."

If a property owner wants to use other people — friends, family, neighboring farmers or contractors — to harvest hogs, Reid points out that every shooter must carry a copy of a crop damage permit issued for the property and must be listed on the permit. Such permits are issued in Alabama for hogs and doe deer.

For more information on hog trapping, including designs and material lists, e-mail Jaworowski at chris.jaworowski@dnr.alabama.gov. Or, call Ronald Britnell, Alabama Extension regional coordinator, at 256-773-2549.

U.S. soldier takes on new enemy at home

By PAM GOLDEN

ROD Pinkston spent 23 years learning how to fight enemies of the United States.

As he readies for retirement, his next challenge is fighting wildlife that threatens U.S. farmers — specifically, feral hogs. And he approaches it with the technology of the modern soldier and the focused perseverance of a professional fighter.

"I've taken the technology that makes us experts in combat and use that for feral hog control," Pinkston says. "What I see is farmers are at war with hogs. Why not use the same technology that makes us effective on the battlefield?"

Pinkston, owner of Jager Pro Tactical Boar Hunting, uses \$20,000 long-range thermal spotting scopes to hunt hogs at night. He pays for those scopes by charging big-game hunters about \$1,000 a night to experience the thrill of going after big game at night. He stages his hunts on farms in Georgia.

"The hard part is getting the clients; the easy part is finding the farmers with a problem," Pinkston says. "I'm able to take care of the farmer's hog problem from February until they finish planting peanuts in June for free."

Between Jan. 15 and March 26, Pinkston harvested 131 hogs, including 14 taken from one farmer's cornfield.

Though not all hunters are fans of eliminating hog populations, it's Pinkston's goal. Yet it's a goal that he doesn't see anyone achieving.

"There's no other big-game species that produces as fast," Pinkston says. "Traditional hunting is never going to fix the problem. You put a little pressure on feral hogs and they become 100% nocturnal."

In addition to his own efforts, Pinkston also writes for hog hunting magazines and is working with USDA to address feral hog problems, which are spreading across the United States. Pinkston also is a member of the National Wildlife Control Operators Association and earned the coveted "Jagdschein" hunting European boars in Germany, Poland and the former Czechoslovakia.

He spoke in April at the 2008 National Conference on Wild Hogs. Pinkston says controlling the hog population requires a three-prong approach: **Trap.** Bait traps in spots where hog activity is evident. Kill all but one gilt caught in the trap. Tag the gilt with a microchip similar to those used on hunting dogs.

Track released gilt. She'll find a new herd. Shoot that herd where they're bedded down for the day.

Hunt at night. Thermal scopes allow hunting nocturnal hogs — especially large boars — at night.

"Now we're hitting them with three technologies 24 hours a day," Pinkston says. "That's what it's going to take to control feral hogs."



SOLDIER FOR HIRE: Rod Pinkston, the non-commissioned officer in charge of the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit's Olympic Shotgun Team at Ft. Benning, Ga., lends his expertise to agriculture by controlling feral hogs.

Get deer hunters on the same page

HUNTING leases on farms sometimes make a deer population worse. As Joel Martin of Auburn University's Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center points out, hunters prefer to take bucks; doe deer create the population explosion.

Martin recommends landowners require that those on the lease take out a certain number of doe before taking any bucks and require proficiency tests for all hunters. Further, landowners need to educate lease holders and neighbors on the value of reducing the numbers of deer.

"We spent the last 20 years overeducating the deer and undereducating hunters," Martin says.

To improve deer harvest, Martin says, require hunters to get off the food plots, minimize early — especially pre-season — entry into the hunting area and hunt the edges first. Change how you approach the area, and use different vehicles.

"Move your stands and pay attention to the wind," Martin says.

When talking to leaseholders, make sure they grasp that the problem with the deer is hurting business and, if not addressed, could lead you to take additional action.

"Make them understand that your goal is reduced deer numbers to reduce crop loss," Martin says. "Make them understand that if they don't take out enough deer, you're going to a crop deprivation permit."

Mark Smith, Auburn University Extension wildlife management specialist, suggests including a financial penalty for not taking does or hogs — if they're a problem. The best way to invoke a financial penalty is to include it in the lease "rebate style," Smith says.

"Get your money up front," Smith says. "If they make the harvest, then they get the money back."

In the short term, hunters on your land and neighboring land will see fewer deer. Ultimately, however, they'll see better bucks.

"Leaving the populations unchecked is the worst possible thing that could happen," says Lt. Frank Reid, an Alabama wildlife conservation officer. "It's not just bad for humans; it's bad for the wildlife population."