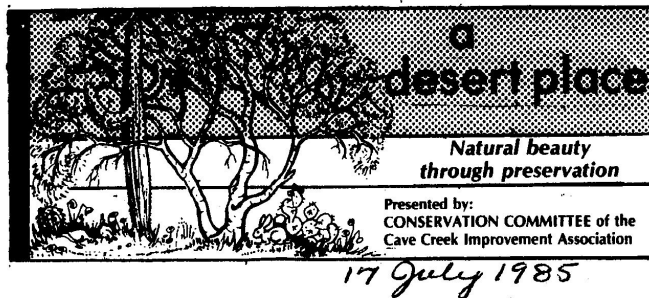


Javelina:

Questions and answers



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by Bert Edises

What has four legs, is a poor mother, is mad about prickly pear cactus and has made the front page of the *Foothills Sentinel* twice within the past six months?

The answer, as every nature lover ought to know, is the javelina (*Pecari tajacu*) — sometimes called wild hog, musk hog or collared peccary.

The events that led to front-page coverage in this newspaper concerned the incursion of the javelina into the Carefree-Cave Creek region. Driven, probably, by heightened rainfall, the javelina began to extend their habitat and enter urban areas, where residents reported them to be eating their yard plants and sunning on their patios.

If you are a resident of Southern Arizona and want to learn how to cope with the javelina, the following brief catechism may be useful:

How do you pronounce javelina?

Ha-veh-lee-na

What is the origin of the name?

From the Mexican javeline (javelin or spear), referring to the creature's spear-like tusks.

To what group of animals is the javelina closely related?

Although a different family from domestic swine, javelina is nonetheless regarded as an authentic pig — the New World pig, as one authority has phrased it.

What does it look like?

Peccary (javelina) looks somewhat like a small razorback hog, with a piglike snout and a heavy cone-shaped head that is bigger than its bottom. Although its total length is only around 37 inches and its weight around 60 pounds, it is, surprisingly, classified officially as a big-game animal — and troops of hunters annually seek permits to kill them.

To complete the description of *Pecari tajacu*, black and white bristles give the adults a kind of pepper and salt coloration, with a dark-gray tone predominating. A whitish band encircles the front of the shoulders, resembling a collar; this is the source of one of the animal's common names, "collared peccary."

The javelina also has a pair of tusks which never stop growing, and are capable of doing great harm to any object within their range.

What does the javelina eat?

Pecari tajacu is almost exclusively vegetarian. Cactus, especially prickly pear, is its favorite food. It is also very fond of tubers, bulbs and various fleshy roots, annuals and perennials. Mast, i.e., nuts, acorns, etc. found on forest floors, is especially delectable to javelina. When javelina feeds on a plant, the feeding is rarely to the extent of killing the plant.

Contrary to rumor, he does not kill and eat and kill rattlesnakes and lizards as part of his regular diet, nor does he kill calves and sheep. We have this on the authority of the Arizona Game and Fish, one of whose wildlife scientists, Theodore Knipe, conducted an in-depth study of the javelina.

Why is *Pecari tajacu* considered a poor mother?

Javelinas travel in herds averaging about 8.5 animals in number. Sows usually have one to two piglings per litter. When confronted with danger, such as men with guns in hunting season, sows have been observed to abandon their young and seek safety for themselves.

Is javelina destructive to the range or to residential property?

There is considerable controversy over this question. Some ranchers, as well as Carefree-Cave Creek people whose gardens have been subjected to "rooting" by peccaries will reply with a rousing affirmative. Game and Fish experts, perhaps occupationally biased on the animal's side, deny that javelina's rooting activities are harmful to the range; some go so far as to claim that the little pig's rooting actually benefits the soil. This claim is heatedly denied by some whose property has been the object of a javelina's attention.

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continued

Is javelina dangerous to man?

Most people with first-hand knowledge of the javelina will agree that it has an ugly disposition. Nevertheless, there is a remarkable absence of credible accounts of *Pecari tajacu* attacking or injuring man. A review of the evidence compiled by Knipe in "The Javelina in Arizona" leads that observer to conclude that, under extreme provocation the peccary may attack man, but that in general the presence of man makes the javelina seek to escape rather than attack. We have already noted its propensity for abandoning its young in the presence of danger.

Can the javelina be eaten?

Yes, it is widely hunted for its flesh, as well as its hide. As for the culinary value of the former, there is some difference of opinion. There are those who rank javelina meat as a delicacy, especially when barbecued. Others say that while edible, the meat is inferior to ordinary pig meat. Apparently it's a matter of taste.

It is my hope that the foregoing will give the householders of the area some hints as how to cope in case the recent invasion of javelinas is repeated. Perhaps the soundest advice would be: If you see a javelina charging at you, get out of the way. And, if you are worried about a javelina churning up your garden, put a fence around it — first checking with the proper officials to see whether it is permitted.

Finally, if nothing else works, use your heightened knowledge of the javelina's ways to enable you to relax and enjoy the interesting little critters.