

HOG HUNT

by Ernie Showalter

Frank approached me and asks, "would I be interested in going on a hog hunt"? Since the hogs here in West Texas are the feral hog, I knew what we were after. "When do we go?" "Next Friday," he answers. "What do I need to take?" "Some warm clothes, a hand gun and maybe a little to eat," he says. "What's it going to cost?" "Don't worry about that, it's my treat!"

Having never gone on a hog hunt I wasn't sure what was needed. The gun was the easiest since I have only one hand gun. Warm clothes included winter underwear, wool flannel shirt, carhartt coverall, leather boots and winter socks. For something to eat peanut butter is always a standby. There was a new two pound jar of nutty peanut butter, a half loaf of bread, a box of granola bars and several bottles of water.

Frank picked me up at 4:00 PM Friday evening with plans to meet Mike at the Penwell turnoff. When we left highway 20 going north on the Crane highway we met Mike who said "Just follow me." After 15 or so miles of a paved road we turned east on a gravel road. After 5 or 6 miles of the dirt road Mike turned up an oil field service road.

Oil well service roads are not roads at all. Roads normally seem to have a direction, not oil well service roads. Before we got to our destination the service road went by several well locations, two tank batteries, and a wind mill for livestock water and finally dogged around several sand dunes with no evidence where we were going. The service road went up a hill that provided a general observation of a low level area. In this depression was a galvanized metal building, which was where we were going.

This was one of those times when one doesn't want to show ignorance by asking dumb questions. There was a small structure that had the resemblance of an oil production field office. We all went into the building to use the facilities, and to take a look at previous hog hunts in pictures on the wall and the bleached skulls of several trophy hog heads.

The thing that makes a hog skull outstanding is the length of the tusks. Except for the tusks they all look alike. The boar will have longer tusks. Hog tusks are like rattle snake rattles. When hogs or snakes get old the tusks or rattles have normally been broken. There was one hog skull that had two unbroken tusks approximately four inches long. That hog either did not do much fighting or was very successful at how his fighting tools were used. Getting long tusks without getting broken is an exception. The broken tusk is a tale of the battles they get into to show which hog is boss and which hog is not.

The building which may have been an oil field office was now a bunk house. Maybe a bunk house is not the correct name but it was outfitted for hunters that needed an overnight sleep. Feral hog hunts can be an hour or 24 plus hours long. It all depends on where you are and where the hogs are.

The word was given to load up. The caravan consisted of two pickups, each tied to a trailer. Each trailer was loaded with a Polaris Ranger ATV. On the back of the lead pickup was a box for dogs. On the back of one of the Rangers was a box for a dog.

The dogs were loaded up and we got in the pickups to get the hunt on the road. The party consisted of two guides, Delbert and Matt each driving the pickups. The hunters consisted of, Mike, Adam, Frank and Ernie. We traveled about a mile or on the county road before turning into another oil well service road.

Having gone about a mile we stopped and let the dogs out of the pen that was on the back of the pickup. There were three dogs that proceeded to jump on to the top of the pickup cab. A section of bed liner was glued to the cab to provide footing for the dogs.



Now it was question time, dumb or not. What are those dogs going to do on the cab of the lead pickup? Well you see, Delbert explained, those are the chase dogs. The chase dogs are the Catahoula breed. He told us, "We will drive slowly down the service road while the dogs are looking, smelling and listening for hogs. When they spot a hog they will jump off the pickup and after the hogs."

We proceeded to travel the service road to a location where there was a watering tank for livestock. The tank was completely surrounded with hog tracks indicate we were at least in hog

country. Little attention was given to where the dogs went while the guides discussed what the plan was when we found hogs. When on a hog hunt there is prearranged which person will claim the first or next hog. No matter what it is, the assigned hunter must claim the hog. It might be an oversize boar too tough to eat or a piglet weighing 60 pounds. The hunter will decide when the hog is captured what the decision will be. It is also the responsibility of the assigned hunter to kill the hog or get someone that will. No hog caught will be given the freedom to go free. It's an agreement between the landowners and the guides, no hog capture will be let free.

The feral hogs are out of control multiplying far too fast making them a damaging varmint to land owners. The Texas game department allows hunters to hunt any time, anyway and take as many as they want. Land owners normally will honor hog hunters that obey the law of the land, close all gates opened, chase no livestock and most importantly, do not harm any of the livestock on the ranch where hunting is allowed and kill all hogs they catch regardless of their size.

While it was still light the guides were discussing where we were and where would be the best place to find hogs. The dogs were just let to run with little attention given to where they were or what they were doing. When the dogs are on a run they make no sound. If and when they spot a hog and the chase is on they will generate a bark. This bark is a welcome sound to the guides who know what the dogs are saying. The feral hog has the capability to lay low and unless kicked up will be difficult to spot. They are well colored and blend well with the surroundings. Hunters may walk right beside a hog and not see them.

As the guides were considering our next move, the dogs started barking. The lead guide hollered, "Hey!! The dogs have found a hog!" From the sound of the bark the dogs were a short distance



from where we were parked. With the dogs were so close we took off afoot to see what we had. The dogs had a hog cornered, well maybe. Since these are the chase dogs they are not trained to take the hog down. It is their job to chase the hog and hopes to corner the dog long enough for the Polaris Ranger with the single dog to get in the program.

When the hog is cornered and the Ranger with the one dog pen will try to get 50 or fewer yards away from the chase dogs. This is where the take down dog is turned loose. The take down dog is a pit bull that does what they know how do. As soon as the door is opened the pit bull is out of his box cage like a bolt of lightning. He hits the

hog's head with his mouth full open. If he can get clamped down on a hog's ear the fight is over. The hog may squeal but more than likely make no sound and will show no effort to even try to get away. That take down dog knows very well what his job is and does it very well. Note in the bottom picture the take down dog is fitted with a Kevlar vest.

Now that the hog has given up the fight Mat will grab both hind legs. With the pit bull having his hold and Mat the hind legs, it's the job of the designated hunter to make the kill. Remember, it was prearranged who this hog belonged to and whose responsibility it was to make the kill. Mike agreed to take the first hog. The method of killing may seem to be unusual however it is the accepted methods to kill a feral hog when dogs are used. An 8 inch knife is inserted into the chest cavity right behind the front leg. If you can picture a hog having an arm pit, the arm pit is where the knife is inserted. Insert the knife as far as possible in the direction of the hog's mouth.



Note in the picture, Mat has the hogs hind legs, the take down dog has the hog demobilized, Mike has his knife ready to make the kill

and the chase dogs knowing its safe are making contact with the hog.

When withdrawing the knife, the handle is lifted up while the blade is forced down. This procedure is intended to cut through the heart and lungs of the hog. The heart and lungs of the hog are very low in the chest cavity making this method a very effective way of killing and bleeding the animal.

The use of hand gun would not be safe considering there are several dogs involved and at least one of the guides holding the hind legs of the hog. The knife is the only safe practical method to make the kill. Mike has been on several hog hunts, so placing the knife properly for a good kill was no big deal. When the hog is stuck there is a complete surrender of life. The animal does not squeal, kick or make any addition signs of life. It is all over. The term, sticking a hog is the accepted words used to describe exactly how the hog was killed.

It may seem cruel but hunting of any type of wild game results in killing. Sticking the hog is just as fatal and may be less painful than wounding a deer with a non fatal shot. Whether the hunted is a duck, goose, deer, elk or antelope the result is the same, the animal or bird is killed

It is interesting to watch the chase dogs after the hold down dog has the hog disabled. They do not try to attack the hog during the chase knowing the hog will do everything it can to get a bite of a chase dog. When the hog is cornered they circle the hog continuing to bark but making sure they keep their distance. When the hog is held down by the pit bull or after the hog is dead the chase dogs act like they want to eat the animal

Everything went off as planned with no unexpected things happening. The dogs are well trained and the guides know exactly

how to make the hunt a safe and successful event. This is what they do several nights a week in the winter months. The hunting year winter of 08 and 09 they had killed over 300 hogs. It's a matter of the number of hogs available and the ability to find them that determines the number killed. It's not until the hog is killed does hunter fully know what quality of animal you have.

Our first hog was a boar weighing 160 to 180 pounds. It would have been a better choice if it was a sow or at least a smaller boar. As the boars get bigger they get tough and the meat develops a wild taste. The sows and smaller pigs have little or no wild taste. When one thinks of hogs there is always bacon and lard. The feral hogs have no bacon, there is no lard, and the animal is lean. Don't expect the feral hog to taste like pork. Actually the feral hog tastes more like venison with little or no wild taste, in my opinion.

After an animal is killed there is the need to field dress it as soon as possible. How the animal is handled after it is killed has a large bearing on the quality and flavor of the meat. Field dressing requires some degree of responsibility. Field dressing is considered the removal of the intestines but is far more than that. There is the urine bag, possible fetal material, sex organs and anus. All must be removed properly to prevent contaminating the meat.

Mike with the assistance of the guides proceeded to dress the hog as soon as possible and before going on the hunt for another hog. As soon as the animal is killed there are bacteria that start with the decay of the internals. In an hour the animal will be bloated with gas if it is not field dressed soon after it is killed. The guides will do all the field dressing but true hunters will make this a part of their hunt. One might say killing the animal and field dressing separates the boys from the men. Not all hunters can stomach the dressing of their animal.

With the hog dressed and loaded on one of the trailers its time to

go for number two, which is Frank's turn to take and kill the next caught hog. The procedure was to travel the service road with the nose, eyes and ears of our lookouts on the top of the lead pickup caravan to find hogs. It was soon dark but the lookouts do as well after dark as during the day.

Mat was asked how far the chase dogs can smell a hog. He told us that in good conditions they can smell a hog up to nearly a mile. Does that mean the dogs have a good smeller or do the hogs have a bad smell? The answer is, the dogs do have exceptional capability to smell and hogs can have a strong smell. Now that it was dark conditions changed to following the service road with head lights waiting for the dogs do what they do. There is no warning when the dogs make contact except they jump off the bed of the pickup and run out of sight. At that time the caravan is stopped and the hunters wait until we get a report bark from the dogs. Barking signifies they have a hog located and are in the process of getting it cornered. Cornered means the hog has stopped running. It's the job of the chase dogs to just hold the hog in place. The dogs will circle the hog, barking and trying to convince the hog there is no way to escape. The dogs are telling us they have a hog, but where are they and how do we get there? Take a close look at the dogs when they are on the cab of the pickup. You would notice each has a transmitting antenna attached to a radio collar. Mat has a hand held GPS receiver that tells him exactly where the dogs are and how far away they are. Getting to where they are may have some challenges because the hog doesn't follow any road and has no respect for fences.

The guides do have a fair knowledge of the area and will try to get as close as possible using the service roads. When there is the lack of road or fence that stops the pickups its time to unload the Rangers. Remember it doesn't make any difference where Mat is, he knows exactly in which direction and how far away the dogs are. After a gate was found we were only several hundred yards

from the dogs. With the GPS Mat and Delbert drove the Rangers directly to the dogs when it was pitch dark. The hog was cornered which made it possible to unleash the take down dog. As before the pit bull was out of the box and on the hog faster than you can tell it. With the hog disabled and Mat took hold of his hind legs, its time for Frank to do his job. The hog Frank killed was a sow, maybe 150 pounds, which was a good catch.

When the dogs reported back that they had Frank's hog there were sounds from a herd of hogs indicating there was the possibly several sows with little ones. The hog Frank killed was put in the back of a Ranger without dressing hoping the dogs would make contact with the herd.

By the time the Rangers were loaded on the trailers the dogs were reporting. The service road allowed us to head in the direction of the dogs until we were about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. The rangers were unloaded and off we went. The GPS again took us directly to the hogs. To our surprise the dogs had two hogs. One a large sow and the other a small 50 pound pig. It was Ernie's turn to own a hog. After killing the sow Mike said he would like to have the small one. Now we all have a hog except Adam. The herd of hogs we intercepted was close enough the dogs soon had one cornered. The killing of the hog for Adam made it a hog for each hunter plus the small additional one for Mike. We left the campground at 5:00 PM and were back to camp by 8:00 PM with five hogs.

The oil well service road we were on connected with a major county road. We had four hogs that had not been field dressed. The county road made an excellent place where the ground was solid with no dust, grass or mesquite. As they were dressed the internals were drug off the road into the ditch. It doesn't make a good impression with the sheriff to dress your animals and leave the entrails on the roadway. Now we had five hogs all dressed and headed for camp.

It is normal to get the hide off to let the animals cool. The hide is a good insulator and the animal does not cool well if not skinned. Mike suggested we take all the hogs home where they would be hung up and skinned in the morning. The night was cool, near freezing which allowed the hogs to cool. Hunting is normally done in the winter when it is cool and the meat cools down in a reasonable time. In the summer when it's hot hunters skin the animals as soon as possible and put the skinned hogs in a cooler.



When we reported to Mike's place at 8:00 AM the next morning all the hogs were hanging up in his outdoor covered patio. We were told, "Get your skinning knife and go to work." It took four skinners about an hour to get the hides off.



Then it was decision time to decide how the hogs were cut up. Roasts, hamburger, sausage, back strap, loin or ribs are the choices. The majority of the meat was made into sausage or hamburger but some was reserved for all the other choices. The hamburger and sausage was double ground by an electric meat grinder. After the first grind the sausage was flavored and had some purchased hog fat added.

The feral hog is free of fat making it necessary to add additional pork fat needs to be added to make it a sausage consistency. Mike had the meat grinder for baloney loaves or hamburger and all the facilities to fill sausage sleeves.



It is mighty satisfying to eat meat you have personally had a hand in producing!

Ernie Showalter
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