

Wild pigs aggravate property owners

By JEFF HUDSON
CORRESPONDENT

Wild pigs are tearing up gardens and landscaping in the Mt. Madonna area, as well as meadow areas in Mt. Madonna Park. Unhappy home owners are talking about how to bring the pigs under control, and a few are taking matters into their own hands and trying to kill the pigs themselves.

Elizabeth Kilpatrick, a teacher with the Watsonville/Aptos Adult School, has lived on Summit Road above Mt. Madonna Park for 10 years. "We never had a problem (with pigs) until last year, and even then they only came occasionally."

This year is different, Kilpatrick said. "We have watched our acre and a half be systematically 'roto-tilled' and were amazed that everything could be uprooted in such a short time. They've come again and again, and dug up our whole open area." Only the fenced-off part of Kilpatrick's garden emerged unscathed.

Kilpatrick sent an open letter to other residents along a five-mile-long stretch of Summit Road, and she's organizing a meeting to "confront this pig problem and let the Department of Fish and Game know about the problem in our area."

David Hissim has lived atop the ridge north of Mt. Madonna for 15 years — his driveway begins in Santa Clara County but ends a few yards later in Santa Cruz County. "I've seen systematic rooting up of the entire yard by the pigs ... everything but the driveway, where

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— Elizabeth Kilpatrick

the ground's too hard for them to do any damage. The biggest group I've seen is eight pigs." Hissim's father Marlin, who also lives on the mountain, has seen as many as 12 pigs in a group.

"There's been a problem with wild pigs in the Mt. Madonna area for many years," said James Nee, an inspector/biologist with the County of Santa Cruz, who is based in Watsonville. "They primarily dig up improved pastures and landscaped areas."

"There seem to be a lot of pigs, a very thriving population," agreed Jeannine DeWald, an associate wildlife biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game. She's based in Santa Cruz, and her territory extends from Santa Clara County through to San Mateo County — basically, the Santa Cruz Mountains. DeWald has been getting lots of reports of pig activity throughout the region. "They do root, and it does look ugly," she said.

DeWald says there's no solid data on exactly how many pigs there are, or whether the pigs — which are not a native species — are hurting other wildlife.

Dave Ellis, senior ranger at Mt. Madonna County Park (which is operated by Santa Clara County), is also careful when responding to inquiries about pigs. Ellis said he's received many comments about "all this 'roto-tilling' in meadow areas ... but in a park that's over 3,000 acres, percentage-wise it's a very small area."

As to whether the digging is causing a problem for other species, Ellis said, "We just don't know ... that's a very fair way to put it. It could be aerating the soil, and we're not sure what the impact is on rodent populations, and in turn on predators."

Ranger Don Rocha, who holds a degree in wildlife management from Humboldt State, is currently doing a vegetative survey to determine the pigs' effects on plants.

Many home owners in mountain areas are quicker to reach a verdict. "There doesn't seem to be a lot of sympathy for pigs among the public," DeWald observed. But opinions differ as to whether the pigs should be exterminated or controlled through non-fatal means.

According to DeWald, there are several options. "Wild pigs are classified as a game animal under California law," he said. "You need a valid hunting license and pig tags. Property owners can also call the Department of Fish and Game and request the names of hunters. You can interview people, find someone you're comfortable with, and give them permission to hunt on your property."

She added that if the pigs are causing significant property damage, it's also possible to get a Depredation Permit by contacting Fish and Game's office in Monterey, (408) 649-2870.

However, for the "average small-property owner," DeWald recommends "identifying those areas you want to protect. Then fence those areas off." She uses an electric fence at her own residence.

REFERENCE

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