



Special to the Sentinel

Jim Riveland with a 300-pound specimen.

Where the wild pigs roam

They're here, from Watsonville to the North Coast ranches

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DAVENPORT — Lud McCrary still recalls the first time he saw a wild pig around here.

It was about nine years ago. He was on horseback on the North Coast where his family has owned property since the 1860s.

His horse got real spooky. McCrary knew something was around.

Then he heard them, pigs crashing through the brush. All he saw was a blur, accompanied by the roar of pigs passing.

That was a time when the pigs were shy. Since then, the pigs have homesteaded, bred like, well, pigs, and become bold. They've wallowed in McCrary's water springs, rototilled through his horse camp and foraged for truffles in his fields.

Recently, when McCrary and his wife, Barbara, were horseback riding, two young pigs passed in front of them. Their horses stopped.

"Pretty soon, two more came out, then some more. We had 11 of them walk out across in front of us and they were nice, young healthy pigs," said McCrary, his soft voice stretched tight with exasperation.

Like other North Coast ranchers and more and more homeowners whose properties are on the fringe of state parks — hog havens — McCrary is adjusting to life with wild pigs.

He isn't happy about it. But like the raccoons that harvest his corn, the deer that partake of his landscaping, the pigs are here, beating a path from one end of the county to the other.

In Watsonville, they've been pigging out in the apple or-

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chards. In Big Basin Redwoods State Park, they're wallowing in the springs, eating acorns and native iris.

They're churning lawns from Bonny Doon to homes around Nisene Marks State Park in Aptos. They've been trapped at Cabrillo College and on the soccer field of San Lorenzo Valley Junior High in Felton after tilling \$3,000 of freshly installed sod last year.

They've surprised bikers at Wilder Ranch State Park. They trot boldly across Lockheed Missiles and Space Co.'s 4,000-acre facility in Bonny Doon. They're eating potatoes at Route One Farms on the North Coast.

The long, slim, razor-backed swine have become so established in Santa Cruz County, that at least one local hunter, Jim Riveland, offers "wildlife and property management." In other words, he shoots the pigs that have gone hog-wild on the landscaping of expensive homes.

Since moving onto the McCrary family property, the pigs have practically subdivided. The young bachelor pigs hang out at McCrary's home. The sows, their young and the old boars prefer his daughter's place nearby.

McCrary fences springs wherever practical. He's also fought back with traps, baiting the big cages with chocolate candy and apples — but with limited success. The traps have to be checked daily, and are likely to catch deer or calves instead. Permits to trap have to be obtained from the state Department of Fish and Game. Often by the time he had a permit, the pigs were gone. When the permit expired, they'd return.

One September, McCrary assembled his family members into a posse to ride herd on the porkers. First, he built a hog corral at the end of the meadow where the nocturnal marauders had been seen.

Seven pick-up trucks swung into action, moving in on the pigs, herding them into the corral. "There were deer and pigs running all which ways," says McCrary.

They nabbed 11 of them in that stinging. But McCrary didn't have the heart to kill them. He loaded them into his horse trailer and took them to a hunting ranch in San Benito County. (The trailer still bears the scars from their tusks.)

Over the years, McCrary has allowed others to hunt on his property, but found that it only makes sense to allow local hunters who know his land, the property boundaries and where homes are located.

Now McCrary hunts the pigs. Under state rules, he's allowed to take a pig a day during daylight hours, although he gets nowhere near that limit. Several weeks ago, he shot a 150-pound sow churning through the pasture with his hors-

es and bull.

On the other hand, he caught a piglet not too long ago and turned it loose. He just couldn't kill it.

McCrary accepts this ambivalence toward the pigs with a shrug. He likes pigs, his kids used to raise them.

But he calls them the "biggest environmental disaster in the county in years, worse than man, development or logging or anything."

They dirty the spring water, coating themselves in mud. With their sturdy snouts, they flip over rocks and loose logs to get alligator lizards and garter snakes. They root out native plants — including the wild iris. They cut narrow, steep paths that, in the winter rains, become eroded gullies. They eat acorns, in direct competition with the deer.

"On the ranch they tear up the ground so badly you can hardly drive over it," says McCrary.

By most reckonings, the problem dates back to 1920, when European pigs were introduced to the Carmel Valley. They crossbred with feral pigs, domestic pigs that had run wild.

The pigs that made their way into Santa Cruz County around 1984, however, are the wild ones, says McCrary. "These guys were from some of the true wild European stock that was brought down to Monterey to hunt many years ago."

The pigs quickly took up residence in Nisene Marks, where they like to wallow in White's Lagoon, and in the North Coast. This past year, during a 100-mile endurance horse race, McCrary found evidence of them all over the San Mateo County border.

They are in all the state parks in the county, except the beaches, according to George Gray, resource ecologist with state Parks and Recreation Department. "They're almost like deer now," he said.

While the pigs were extending their range, landowners were pleading for help. The county battled the state department of Fish and Game; hunters and animal rights activists squared off.

Eventually, rules for pig hunting were approved. They can be trapped or shot, and their meat given to a charitable organization. But they cannot be poisoned and the permit, while setting no limit on number taken, is good only for several weeks.

Or they can be hunted during the day, year-round, using a license, with limit of one a day.

Meanwhile, no hunting, trapping or other pig control is taking place inside the state parks, where the animals have a firm hoof-hold, according to Gray.

The pigs arrived at Rancho del Oso, south of McCrary's, about a year and a half ago, according to

Bob Briggs. His wife's family sold the land to the park system, but they still own about 1,000 acres bordering the park.

Until recently, the pigs stayed mostly in the hills, ripping up family picnic grounds, says Briggs.

A few weeks ago, they made what pig-folk call an incursion into the fields along the main road through Rancho del Oso, tearing through the potato patch. It's the first foray into the agricultural field, and Briggs expects more as the pig population grows.

Given those predictions, Riveland, the hunter, may eventually retire his carpentry tools and make his living going after pigs. As it is, the former game guide hunts on three large properties in Bonny Doon.

Over the past five years, Riveland and his dog, Sable, have tracked and killed about two dozen pigs, using a rifle and pistol. He fills his freezer with the meat and shares it with friends and local soup kitchens.

Dawn and dusk are the best times to get them, and while it's raining so they don't hear him approach, says Riveland.

He respects his prey. They're "tough, hardy and smart," and far more dangerous than buying a few pork chops at the supermarket, he says.

The pigs crash through bramble bushes laced with poison oak that Riveland has to crawl through. He's had them lay in wait along a trail, then charge him from behind. Whereas a deer spooked by a hunter eventually returns to the same spot, a pig won't, says Riveland. "If you run off a pig, he knows you're hunting him."

If cornered, they'll charge, and their razor-sharp tusks are to be reckoned with.

"They like to sharpen their teeth on power poles," says Riveland. "I'll show you some teeth rips that are above your waist. They dig right in ... it looks like someone with a chisel carving grooves in the pole."

Last week, Riveland shot two long-snouted hairy hogs on a 21-acre estate bordering Nisene Marks — bold porkers that had been rooting right up to the foundation of the house. "The lawn looked like a golf course," said Riveland. "In the matter of a couple of hours, a small group of pigs turned it into a plowed field."

He hunted one old 400-pound boar in Bonny Doon for two months, dogging him in the dawn and dusk several days a week.

After cat-and-mousing around, or rather, wallowing around, the old boar finally fell for Riveland's hog call, a low pitched grunt that brought him running out of the brush.

It's a call of the wild Riveland is using more and more. After all, there are plenty of pigs to answer.