

Wild Wednesday 28 October 2020 Javelina by Walt Anderson

The feature this Wild Wednesday is the Collared Peccary, often called Javelina in the Southwest. A lovely 1999 children's book by Conrad Storar, *Don't Call me Pig: A Javelina Story*, tried to disassociate this New World animal from the Old World pig. However, "javelina" is derived from the diminutive feminine "jabalina" in Spanish for the Wild Boar ("jabali"). The Wild Boar, of course, is a pig!

To make things even more confusing, there appears to be an internet myth that peccaries are rodents. How anyone could think that a hoofed mammal could be a rodent is almost as far-fetched as believing that climate change is a hoax.

So, what is the truth? Peccaries today consist of three species in the family Tayassuidae confined to the Americas, while pigs consist of 18 or 19 species (various *Sus* pigs, warthogs, babirusas, etc.) in the Old World family Suidae. Both are in the order Suiformes, so they are distant relatives, having branched off from a common ancestor in Europe more than 30 million years ago. The ancestors of peccaries apparently crossed the Bering land bridge and only reached South America during the Great American Interchange about 3 million years ago. Today, they are primarily tropical animals, with some Collared Peccaries expanding the species' range northward, now all the way to Flagstaff in Arizona. However, they are not strongly cold-adapted, and harsh winters can knock them back from colder areas.

Peccaries differ from true pigs by having straight canines, only three digits (two hooves and a dewclaw) on the back feet, a very short tail, a dorsal scent gland (which some early scientists thought was a second navel!), a more complex digestive system (though not as advanced as that of true ruminants), and other anatomical features. They also lack the obvious sexual dimorphism of pigs.

These very social animals occur in herds that are territorial against other groups and defensive against predators. While eyesight is poor, hearing and sense of smell are well-developed. While some hunters have portrayed them as dangerous animals (head mounts of trophies typically show a snarling, canines-bared expression that is not true to life but implies a braver hunter), our Javelinas are easily approachable if they don't catch your scent. I have had them come right up to me by standing still (though it was hard not to laugh out loud). They will defend themselves very capably against dogs, coyotes, even the jaguar, though the latter usually brings home the bacon.

More comments on their natural history will continue with the photo captions. Enjoy!



Recently at Willow Lake in Prescott, I encountered a herd of at least a dozen animals, and even though I was totally in the open, they approached me without any sense that I was there. Even my camera shutter didn't disturb their feeding, and they didn't react until I actually walked almost up to them.



The long, straight canines are used in defense and in food procurement and processing (in the tropics, this enables them to crack hard nuts). They clack the teeth as a warning threat.



In the arid Southwest, their diet consists mainly of tough succulents (prickly pear, agave, and yucca). These provide needed moisture, though cacti are low in protein and high in oxalic acid, which can harm their livers if eaten in excess. Javelinas rip off chunks of cactus pads, leaving ragged edges, unlike the smooth chew marks of woodrats in the same area. Spines are little or no deterrent.



Because of oxalic acid, Javelinas are a bit choosy in which cacti they eat, and they do eat grasses, forbs, mesquite beans, acorns, and manzanita berries where these are available.



Clearly, some foods are more desirable than cacti when peccaries share habitats with humans! They love tasty flowers, too, so they create a classic case of human-wildlife conflict.



Unlike those prolific domestic pigs, Javelinas most commonly have twins. Jack Schaefer wrote: "A baby peccary is one of the most attractive little creatures on the face of this ancient earth" (*An American Bestiary* 1975). Predators find them quite attractive too, so despite parental defensiveness, infant mortality can be high.



We say “when pigs fly” to express an obvious impossibility, but when a startled Javelina takes off, “impossible” seems a bit far-fetched. Adults are quite front-heavy, with tiny rear legs and reduced rump, but they are powerful runners when they need to be. I did this tiny watercolor with one brush and one pigment, Van Dyke Brown. The white is simply the paper showing through. I did use a tiny bit of pink on the dorsal gland above the tail. Peccaries emit a skunklike odor from this gland when excited.



I enjoy my encounters with Javelinas, and I hope this post has given you a better understanding of this Neotropical animal that is often an under-appreciated part of our Arizona fauna.