

Javelina

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SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Tayassu tajacu*. Both the genus and specific epithet are of native Brazilian origin, probably meaning “gnawer of roots” and “peccary,” which in turn means “one who makes paths through the forest.” Known in Central and South America as the “collared peccary,” derived from pale collar of hair across the shoulders and upper back. “Javelina,” which applies to the more northerly populations, is derived from the Arabic *jabali* or *jabaliy*, meaning spear, a reference to the weapon (javelin) historically used to hunt wild boars.

DESCRIPTION: Javelina are not rodents, as some people believe. Although generally referred to as “New World pigs,” technically they are not pigs, either. They are best described as “pig-like.” Arizona javelina average 19-inches tall at the shoulder and 35 inches from snout to vent; weight 35 to 60 pounds. Reds (piglets or piglings) are several inches tall and about as long. Newborns weigh about one pound. Javelina hair is coarse, wiry, and variably colored, ranging from pale gray to dark brown or black. Seasonal molts affect pelage color. Reds are reddish-brown (hence the name) or tan, with a dark stripe down the middle of the back.

DISTRIBUTION: From Argentina north to Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. In Arizona, from the southeastern corner west to Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, north to Cataract Canyon, and along (mostly below) the

Mogollon Rim. Distribution here has increased in recent decades, perhaps in conjunction with a general warming trend in winter temperatures.

HABITAT: Sonoran or Chihuahuan desertscrub vegetation at elevations below 3,500 feet, upward through riparian canyons and semidesert grasslands to scrub oak, chaparral, and open oak-pine woodland at 4,500-6,000 feet. Sometimes occurs in other vegetation types (e.g., open pine forest edges) at higher elevations. Caves, overhangs, mine shafts, and similar cover are essential for refuge from harsh weather and cold nights. Tropical in origin and cannot tolerate cold weather, lacking the guard hairs that insulate many other mammals against the cold.

BIOLOGY: In Arizona, the javelina’s year-round breeding season peaks in January-March. Gestation lasts 145 days. Birthing peaks in June-August, with litters of one to four (average two). The precocial young move with the herd within hours of birth. Weaning occurs at six weeks. A scent gland at the base of the spine secretes a strong musky-smelling oil. Javelina have terrible eyesight, but their hearing and sense of smell are excellent.

Herds average eight to nine animals (of any age class), but may contain as many as 37. Average herd home range is about one square mile. Season (weather), availability of food and water, and presence of other herds dictate herd movements. A portion of the home range is defended against other herds. The initial herd response to danger is usually sudden flight, at speeds of up to 25 mph. Sows with reds may also retreat to cover while other herd members try to drive off a non-human predator.



The javelina’s pig-like snout, razor-sharp canines, and powerful grinding teeth and jaws reflect the animal’s food habits. Javelina are mainly herbivorous, but may consume animal matter as it becomes available. They root for bulbs and tubers, and nibble spine-laden prickly pear cactus pads with seeming impunity. Succulent plants of any type, green grass, acorns, cactus fruits, and beans from mesquites and other leguminous shrubs and trees are also diet mainstays.

STATUS: Javelina are widespread and relatively common in Arizona. The population cycles up and down with weather patterns and occasional disease outbreaks. Statewide surveys indicate a relatively stable population subject to local changes. The javelina has never been a candidate for federal listing as threatened or endangered and is not a state species of special concern.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: The javelina is managed as a “big game” animal in Arizona. Predation, weather, disease, and habitat condition control their numbers. Special management is sometimes needed in agricultural areas to minimize crop depredation, and in urban settings to resolve local conflicts or to provide movement corridors that connect increasingly fragmented patches of javelina habitat. 🦋