
Getting Bacon the Hard Way: Hog-Tying 400 Pounds of Fury

By MICHAEL BRICK

MONTGOMERY, Tex. — That could not have been a wild sow that Nab was harking at down in the scrub brush. Those hogs out behind the golf course were fast, smart and wary of hunters, and Nab was just an unproven pup. At first, the grown hounds ignored his visticato yap.

They had been hunting since 4:30 a.m. without success. Thirteen hours in the East Texas sun had made a discouraged mess of the seven dogs and their masters, Dusty Kennedy and Clint Watson.

“All that rain washed their scent away,” Mr. Watson said earlier. “They’re out here though, somewhere.”

The hogs, he meant. You could tell by the wallows in the fairway, mud patches 6 feet long by 12 feet wide with deep ruts like the tracks of a semi truck.

Experienced deer hunters trained by their fathers, Mr. Watson and Mr. Kennedy were out for the challenge and modest profit of stalking this other, less handsome prey. Long a nuisance to landowners in the South, an estimated four million feral hogs have spread to 37 states in the last few years, according to the federal Department of Agriculture. Omnivorous, destructive and dangerous, they cause an estimated $800 million in property damage every year, or $200 a hog.

“It can look like a plow has been taken through turf, whether it’s in your front yard or on your golf course,” said Carol Banner, a spokeswoman for the department.

Here, in ranching country 50 miles northwest of Houston, wild hogs have found particular ease rooting in the gently sloping greens of Blaketree National Golf Club. “It looks like if you took a shovel and just dug down a foot and flipped the soil over,” said Scott Cory, manager of the course. “It tears the golf course up like you can’t imagine.”

Across the country, game wardens, wildlife biologists and livestock commissioners have started eradicating hogs to control the population. North Dakota began an eradication program in January. Kansas has hunted hogs hard to kill and harder to catch. They recognize traps. They move at night. They run quickly over short distances. They evade hunters in the thick brush. When pursued, they lead dogs into the water to drown. Failing that, they back up against a rock or a tree to fight.

“It’s tough to sneak up on them because of their sense of smell,” said Richard Minnis, an assistant professor of wildlife disease ecology at Mississippi State University. “They are an extremely wary critter. They’re very smart.”

Including repairs and loss of business, Mr. Cory estimated the annual cost of the hogs at $9,000 for Blaketree National. He has found little success with hunting parties that “would grab their guns and beer and just go out screaming and yelling.”

Casting about for a more methodical approach, Mr. Cory was referred to Mr. Watson, 33, a bulldozer operator who culls hogs from nearby ranches in his spare time. Mr. Watson had been building traps with Mr. Kennedy, 25, a student of construction management who had married into his family. They charged landowners $200 for the traps, keeping the right to sell their catch at slaughter for 25 to 30 cents a pound.

For this more sporting endeavor, Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Watson reached somewhat casual terms with their clients. The golf course, for example, provided free food and tea times, and the use of a cottage for their services.

Mr. Watson and Mr. Kennedy are quiet, reserved young men who carried knives on their belts and wore brown caps with references to a Bible verse: “God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

On a morning with a forecast calling for nearly 100 degrees, Mr. Kennedy ate a breakfast of fried pork chops, put on jeans and long sleeves to protect against the brush, and set out around 3 a.m. At a shuttered filling station, he joined Mr. Watson. Their fathers, Bill Kennedy and Billy Watson, were along for backup.

Hauling coolers, ATVs and cages, their convoy rolled up Highway 90 in the starless blackness.

“When we first started, we went a long time without catch-
Wild hogs are at home in the scrub brush of East Texas.

Clint Watson, right, and his father, Billy, with a sow. Feral hogs cause an estimated $800 million in property damage every year.

ONLINE: ON THE PROWL
Video and a slideshow of attempts to keep wild hogs off golf courses to prevent them from causing damage.

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ing a hog,” Kennedy said. “I didn’t think we were ever going to catch one.”

Though a Marlin .30-30 rested by his knee, Mr. Kennedy had no intention of firing a shot. Cornering a hog was the job of the bay dogs, Toby and Buck, the bitch Fire and the pups, Whopper and Nub. Then the hunters would release the catch dogs, Josie and Roadie, to hold down their prey. Next it would fall to Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Watson to restrain the hounds and tie the hog. If all that failed, if a hog broke loose in a southern breeze, the older men would make the kill with the rifles.

Not far from the town of Bedias, the caravan crossed a cattle guard onto a ranch owned by friends of Mr. Watson. The men fitted the bulldogs with layered vests of Kevlar and the bay dogs with four-inch nylon collars to protect their jugular veins. The hounds stood and tested the air, their yelps mingling with the croak of tree frogs in the yaupons.

“Oh, they know it’s fixing to be on,” Bill Kennedy said.

In the gray dawn, the hunters made their way through a thicket of greenbriers, wild lemon trees and bloodweeds. Nearby, the dogs began to yelp. The men gave chase, then waited as the sound died. Around them the trunks of small trees were marked with mud rubbed from the backs of wild hogs.

In time the men came to a clearing, paused for a dip of snuff and checked an electronic monitor for the whereabouts of Fire and Nub. Though their short sharp yelps were resounding, indicating they had bayed a hog, Fire and Nub had failed to summon the other dogs. The hounds seemed to believe this was a false alarm owed to Nub’s youthful enthusiasm.

Mr. Kennedy took the lead with the dogs. Mr. Watson stayed behind, listening. In the distance, the measured barking ended with an awkward yelp.

Through a walkie-talkie, Mr. Watson called for a report. “They were working on something, Whopper and Nub, but they ain’t got it bayed yet,” Mr. Kennedy responded. “I’m thinking about going in there, but I want to get more bay dogs in there.”

Mr. Watson moved toward the sound, then stopped. “Hey Dusty,” he radioed, “I smell a big old boar hog.”

The barking sounded again, and Mr. Watson charged through underbrush worthy of machetes.

Presently, Mr. Watson came upon Mr. Kennedy, red-faced and sweaty, covered in mud, bleeding from a cut that ran halfway across his cheek. Whatever his dog had been chasing seemed to have gotten away. Mr. Watson called in the others.

The dogs emerged with no cuts or scratches. “No proof of a hog, anyway,” Mr. Watson said, kneel-

ing to pet them.

It was 8 a.m. The older men were worried about the dogs in the sun. Mr. Watson proposed a search around the perimeter of the property. For hours, the hunters stomped through thickets and along creek beds. Following a riverbed trail, they found a blue heron, a copperhead and a family of alligators.

“There just ain’t no hogs out here,” Mr. Watson said.

After a lunch of chicken-fried steak in Bedias, the hunters drove to the forest outside the golf course.

When the sun was on its way down, the hunters rounded the golf course and made for a thick wood where hogs had been hunted extensively and had learned the smell of men and dogs. The hunters wandered down a dirt path, carrying the rifles.

From the scrub brush, Nub gave a quick yelp, then started barking with all the insistence his young voice could carry. A moment of doubt, the hounds ran toward him. Across a deep creek, inside a rough thicket, there was Nub, standing a few feet from a squealing wild sow he had backed against a stump.

The hounds set upon the hog, tearing a small chunk of flesh from her haunches and snapping at her ears. Mr. Kennedy pulled them away by the collars, fell upon the sow and held her by the neck. Mr. Watson dropped to his knees, wrapped her hooves with a length of mule tape and then fell back, breathing heavily. He gave Nub a good pat.

“A couple more times like that,” he said, “and these dogs will honor these pups.”

CLINT WATSON, RIGHT, AND HIS FATHER, BILLY, WITH A SOW. FERAL HOGS CAUSE AN ESTIMATED $800 MILLION IN PROPERTY DAMAGE EVERY YEAR.