

Pigs:
On Finding the Way Home
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The pigs are back. Snouts twitching, a family of seven javelinas, the indigenous wild hog-like creatures of the Sonoran Desert, trots past my patio wall. They stop occasionally to yank a bite from fleshy pads of prickly pear or gobble down buckthorn cholla buds. A big boar leads the way. He is a dark, threatening presence. When he catches my scent, the black hair along the crest of his back stands stiff and bristles. Unable to see well, he nevertheless aims his head in my direction and attempts to stare me down. Even though I remain behind the low wall, if I move suddenly, he emits a dank, musky odor--the porcine equivalent of an early warning system.

This boar has such an imposing build. He weighs fifty pounds or more (mostly compact muscle) and is twenty inches tall at the shoulder and thirty-five inches long, snout to tail. His neck is short but powerful, its circumference large enough to make a Sumo wrestler proud. In spring, he lives mostly off his fat reserves in order to spend his time guarding the other members of his herd: a pair of healthy females, two juveniles (three-quarters the size of the adults), an old rogue uncle, and two tiny piglets.

One of the females gave birth to these twins a week ago Friday during a fierce spring storm that gathered power in Mexico and blew into Tucson late in the day. I remember that storm. Huge beads of water pelted the tin on my carport and created a drumming so loud that it drowned out all but the most ferocious blasts of thunder. Curtains of rain rolled from my rental home's roof and threatened to crush the ancient, six-foot agaves that flank the front picture window. Everywhere, soil eagerly absorbed the much-needed moisture, until the next morning when not a single puddle remained. Two days later, the distinctive perfume of creosote still lingered in the desert air and the once

skeleton-like stalks of ocotillo had metamorphosed into pliable green wands. That day at dusk I glimpsed the javelina babies for the first time.

I was standing with my landlady outside her home, a tiny building a few hundred yards from my own. Emérita is ninety-three years old. She's a native of Panama, holds advanced degrees from Columbia and NYU, and still bears a grudge against the United States for gouging out part of her country in order to build "that big ditch." She's lived on the same few acres near the Tucson Mountains for more than half a century and gladly shares the territory with six or seven miscellaneous renters (each of us in our own casita) as well as with deer, jackrabbits, zebra-tailed lizards, rattlesnakes, cactus wrens, gila monsters, and even a bobcat, spotted last week sunning itself on one renter's porch.

As we watched the javelinas rooting their way up the trail from my house to hers, Emérita gripped my arm. Her bony fingers dug into my flesh. She is tall for a woman her age, maybe five foot eight or so, and strong. She frequently wears pastel-flowered house dresses, all cut from the same basic pattern: buttons down the front, a sharp-edged collar, short sleeves, and a hem that ends just below the knees. She wears beige tennis shoes and threadbare cotton socks.

"Cute," Emérita said when we spotted the javelina piglets. Now, I hesitate to use the word cute when describing wild animals. Call it a wish to keep science separate from emotion or a simple dislike of anthropomorphism. Still, this time, I had to agree. Emérita was right; there was no better way to say it. Those babies were the cutest darned things I'd ever seen.

The javelina babies resembled long-legged kittens. Dark eyes twinkling, they were clumsy and curious, tumbling after their mother and stumbling over rocks the size of acorns. Anything larger--a narrow saguaro rib or a bit of downed palo verde--created a major obstacle for them. They left cloven hoof prints no bigger than my pinky fingernail and, as they trotted, the minuscule flaps on their tiny ears bobbed up and down. Their snouts were upturned and

circular, not quite the size of a dime. Unlike their solid black mother, father, aunt, uncle, and older siblings, the twins were brown, the color of pebbles in a shaded arroyo. They were completely brown, that is, except for a black arc that ran along the miniature ridges of their backs and a ruffle of tan fur that rimmed their tiny piggy underbellies.

The herd gradually browsed nearer and nearer to where Emérita and I stood. I wanted to reach down and pet the babies. I wanted to feel if their baby hair was as soft as it appeared, but every time the boar saw me eyeing them, he whoofed and took a few stiff-legged, snuffling steps in my direction. I hated for him to exhaust his energy reserves on my account and, besides, I was more than a little threatened by his bulk; so I obeyed his command and contented myself with observing his offspring from the boundaries of my landlady's porch.

Making close observations of life within the Sonoran Desert is one of the ways I've found to mitigate my un-planned for, but economically necessary moves to different locales throughout my life. I envy people who are able to stay rooted in one place for most of their lives and not be forced to give up their home territory. In my life, already I've lived in the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and now the Sonoran Desert. By studying this desert eco-system in particular, I've been able to re-attach myself to the natural world and find a place I can call home. In particular, I love learning about wild creatures like these "pigs."

Clack. Snort. Snuffle. Click. Chatter. Bark. Woof. Grunt. Growl. Squeal. Javelinas, aka collared peccaries (Tayassu tajacu), have a large repertoire of vocalizations. For example, babies may squeal when separated from their mothers, when jostling for a nipple, or when distressed. These distress calls are especially high-pitched and can be heard over a quarter of a mile away.

Other calls are lower-pitched and more resonant such as the grunts made almost constantly as the herd feeds. My dog had to learn that the grunts weren't

meant to threaten (and consequently didn't require her energetic barking from behind the safety of the patio gate), and that these "contentment calls" simply helped the very social javelinas stay close to each other as they fed. The herd also uses grunts to communicate as it ranges through the thick undergrowth of desert scrub near my casita and as it ambles down the dry arroyo that runs beside my home.

Some of the most frightening sounds I've ever heard javelinas make are their tooth- and jaw-popping sounds, described by Arizona Fish and Game researcher Gerald L. Day as *clicks*, *clacks*, *chatters*, or *smacks*. To produce such a sound, the javelina brings the teeth in its upper and lower jaws together at different rates of speed and intensity. A real attention-grabber, this warning call can almost mimic the staccato-like explosion of a machine gun.

Javelinas don't see well. They rely more on sound and smell than on sight. Objects are clearly in focus only within a range of two or three feet. Past that, their senses of smell and hearing take over. They use their ability to vocalize, along with their senses of hearing and smell, to stay together as a group, their main strategy for protection from predators.

Wherever javelinas wander, the area becomes impregnated by their particular aroma. The creosote-laced upper bajada where I live is no exception. There's a small, specialized scent gland underneath the javelina's bristling hairs near the rear of its back. This organ produces an oily liquid with a strong musky odor. The odor is not as pungent or disagreeable as a skunk's, but it's definitely long-lasting and memorable. Javelina often stand nose to tail and rub their heads across each other's scent glands to mark one another as herd members. They mark their territory too, including their feeding and bedding grounds and their cool, mud wallows. They rub against rocks and branches, patio walls, crawlspaces under mobile homes, pillars on carports, and bath houses next to

swimming pools. In short, wherever the herd makes its home, the place soon begins to smell like “pig.”

Researchers note that somewhere around twenty to twenty-five herds of javelinas roam near Tucson. Each herd consists of about eight to twelve members and claims a territory of one to two square miles. Bobcats, coyotes, eagles, and the occasional mountain lion prey on javelinas, but their major threat in any urban area are humans (because of habitat loss and deadly encounters with automobiles). Javelinas haven't always been desert Southwest residents however. These New World relatives of their distant cousins, the Old World true pig family (Suidae), originally migrated from the sub-tropical regions of South America. Javelinas don't seem to have arrived in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands until around 1700. Jesuit missionaries, Fr. Ignaz Pfefferkorn and Fr. Juan Nentvig, were the first to write about the “musk hogs.” By the mid-1820s, beaver trappers and the leaders of military expeditions reported sighting javelinas along the San Pedro and upper Gila Rivers.

Prior to three hundred years ago, there were no words in the Pima or Tohono O'odham languages for javelina (a word that may come from the Spanish term for the javelin-like spears with which the explorers hunted them). Regardless, native people quickly came to use javelinas as a food source as did Spanish, Mexican, and American settlers. By 1929, however, javelinas had become numerous enough to pose problems for cattle ranchers. Javelinas were over-hunted, both in an effort to rid the territory of a nuisance species as well as to gain profit from their hides which were used for leather and their bristles which were used for brushes. Finally, as herd populations declined over and over again, wildlife specialists instituted game management plans, including recreational sport hunting. These days, hunting season for javelinas includes permits authorizing the use of muzzleloaders, bows and arrows, and handguns.

Of course, not everyone wants to hunt these near-sighted, usually slow-moving creatures. Out where I live, five miles from Tucson and secure on Emérita's several acres, my few neighbors and I can practice peaceful co-existence. One of my neighbors has returned home more than once to find a javelina lounging outside her front door on the ratty old couch that is supposed to be reserved for her cats. Still, other homeowners in the area aren't as easy-going.

Two stories about javelina-human encounters come to mind. The first involves a nouveau riche couple who built a mansion-sized home on the west side of town, smack dab on a piece of property where less financially secure, long-time residents had previously liked to picnic or hike. The new couple hired a landscaping company and spent over \$40,000 installing lovely non-native flowers and shrubs and a lush green lawn. Overnight, their yard and all the plantings were gone, nibbled down to the nubbins by omnivorous javelinas. Somewhere out there in the desert was a herd of satisfied peccaries with bellies full of what had looked like, to them, to be the most sumptuous salad bar ever.

The University of Arizona College of Agriculture and Life Sciences issued a list titled "Javelina Resistant Plants." The list cautions that these plants are "less likely to be eaten by javelina, but there are no guarantees." It goes on to say that "the only certain method to prevent plant injury is through exclusion (a fence or other barrier)." Interestingly, the fence needn't be very high. Two feet or so should do it. Biologists note that javelinas can jump higher; they just don't want to very much.

Additional suggestions for javelina-proofing a garden include spreading hot pepper powder around the perimeter (no shortage of that in the Southwest), or tying ammonia-laced rags to the garden fence, or lacing the soil with lion feces. Robert L. Hoffa, author of Co-existing with Urban Wildlife, suggests, helpfully, that "You can get the cat feces from zoos."

Here's a second story about javelina-human interaction. The city of Tucson extended a bus line to one of its newer, north-side developments and soon, early morning commuters had gathered at the bus stop. They were glad for the shade that the small shelter provided, although there were more people than the single bench could accommodate. Nevertheless, morning after morning, the commuters chatted amiably, drank coffee, and munched on bagels and toast while they waited for the bus.

Then one day the javelinas showed up. Great sense of smell, remember? On the first day, a commuter or two tossed a crust of bread or a bit of bagel to the javelinas and everyone laughed at the antics of the pigs (everyone around here seems to call them that) as they gobbled down people-type treats. Then the bus arrived and folks had a good story to share with co-workers about the cutest desert critters they'd ever seen.

Second day: same people, same critters. But soon enough the pigs seemed to have memorized the bus schedule and one morning, they were waiting at the shelter when the people arrived. The once-cute pigs had morphed into a gang of thugs. They bumped up against people and demanded all of those bagels and that toast that they'd come to enjoy. Coffee sloshed everywhere and there wasn't enough space on top of the single bench for everyone to climb up and escape from these javelinas-with-attitude. When public transportation finally arrived, there was a scary dash for the open door of the bus.

The Game and Fish Department stepped in, captured the javelinas, and tried to re-locate them. They hauled the pigs miles and miles away. A few days later, the herd had returned.

Certainly, this story stands as a cautionary tale, revealing the dangers of feeding wild animals, any wild animal. Even though that herd of javelinas frightened a few folks, in the end, the pigs were the ones who really lost. Game managers and wildlife biologists often say "A fed bear is a dead bear," and

extend that phrase to include any human-fed wild animal. More often than not, when human habitat encroaches on wildlife habitat, it's the wildlife who are evicted. One way or the other.

So yes, I struggle with the fact that my landlady, a woman whom I admire for many reasons and a woman full of life wisdom, insists on feeding her resident herd of javelinas. I'm not able to change the mind of a spunky, opinionated nonagenarian. And yet, secretly, I worry...about her and about what will happen to the javelinas after she is gone.

The other day as Emérita and I sat in lawn chairs on her porch, admiring the sunset, the javelinas returned. As their relatives browsed, the babies engaged in a mock battle with one another. Tiny tusks bared, they snapped and snarled, dodged and wove. Occasionally when the twins crashed into each other, one of them, faking injury, would squeal. At the sound of a baby's distress, all the adults in the group would stop instantly. The mother would rush to the offended infant who would then scuttle for the protection of her underbelly and begin nursing. The boar would direct his fatherly reprimand, a cold-eyed stare, toward the other baby.

"Cute," Emérita said each time the babies tussled. Reaching for my arm, she gave it a squeeze and added, "They're learning to take care of themselves...but for now, Mama and Papa are there to look out for them."

Emérita has a relationship with these javelinas. Because our society tends to avoid our most aged members, the pigs are companions for her in ways people often are not these days. Of course, at least part of this relationship exists because, some of the time, she feeds them. I do not approve of this practice, but nevertheless, she saves the outer leaves of lettuce, the woody ends from celery, watermelon rinds (their favorite), and soft, rheumy-eyed potatoes for the pigs. If the javelinas happen by and if she happens to be outside, Emérita happily tosses

them a few vegetables or a bit of fruit. The evening she and I watched the sunset together, the pigs feasted on wrinkled carrots and wads of wilted spinach.

When my landlady calls a javelina piglet cute, it is no casually cast word. I may guard my language when describing wild animals, may disapprove of feeding them and prefer the surprise of more random encounters, but for fifty years or more, generations of wild pigs have raised their young on Emérita's few acres, the same desert scrub where she and her husband raised their niece. Call it stewardship or simple neighborly kindness. Whatever it is that exists between my landlady and the pigs, they have come to respect one another's presence. They can't talk to each other, nor can they precisely predict the other's behavior from one day to the next, but a kind of mutual appreciation is at work. Something real has emerged through years of constant observation and patience, through years of human being and javelina experiencing the same hot blasts of summer, the same gentle rains of winter, the same pounding thunderstorms of the monsoon season.

Not long ago, Tucson residents struggled through driest season ever--not a drop of rain all July and nothing until early August. Then, about 4:30 p.m. one Thursday, all hell broke loose. I was home trying to convince Abby, my rambunctious springer spaniel, that at 105 degrees, it was still too hot outside to take a walk. For consolation, I took her to the front porch to stretch a bit. Then I saw the clouds: huge roiling clouds, all grey and blue and mauve, rolling up from the southeast and crossing quickly over town, headed right toward the upper bajada where my little house stands.

As soon as the wind started, the dog wanted to go inside and she really wanted to go in when the thunder and lightning began. I watched for a while, but when even the mourning doves began to seek shelter, we headed for cover as

well. I sat on the bench by the picture window until I thought that the glass might give way, just enjoying the show. Spectacular.

It rained hard, so hard that, at one point, I lost sight of the huge agave that grow right outside the picture window. It rained so hard that the birdbath and shallow tinaja on the west side of the house filled. Radio reports said that this side of town received two and a half inches of rain in an hour. For a city without an adequate drainage system, such a deluge caused major damage. Twenty-five cars stalled on the flooded interstate that leads to Nogales. On the other side of town, two people tried to drive through an arroyo and were swept away. The man was rescued, but the woman couldn't get her seatbelt undone and died in the rising water. Downtown at the Santa Fe station, the train couldn't get through because of flooded tracks and downed power lines. Elsewhere, mud and water flowed inside homes and businesses. Ay yi yi!

Because the roof on my house leaks, I had to set multiple buckets and cooking pots and even coolers around the living room and bedroom. Finally, about 7 p.m., the rain let up and I figured it was a good time to take the dog for a walk.

Once outside, I heard the arroyo to the west, roaring as if it carried a lot of water. I'd never seen it with more than a trickle and so, despite my recent knee surgery and multiple bandages, I hobbled down the slope, through the buckthorn cholla and cat claw acacia, and past several snakes that were crawling about, displaced by the rain. Sure enough, the arroyo was raging, bank to bank, and full of dark, brown water. Maybe even boat-able--if you were crazy.

Suddenly, my dog began chuffing, a strange sound I'd never heard her make, and I turned to look behind me. Damn. Three javelina! I was trapped between the river and the pigs with a dog. Not good. The pigs began advancing. I couldn't run because of my bandaged knee and I was surrounded by sticker bushes and snakes.

I didn't know if the javelinas were upset by the storm, out on their nightly rounds to search for food, or merely agitated by the presence of the dog, but whatever the case, they were coming toward us. I called for Abby, clipped the leash on her, beat my way through the thorns, and raced (at a gimpy clip) upslope. By the time I reached the level gravel of the carport, the pigs were snorting--and sprinting. No time to make it to the front door of the house. The dog and I dove into the car just as the pigs charged.

Instantly, the dog started to bark insanely; the sound amplified within the close space of the car. The pigs started to circle the car and then ram it. At this point I figured that, in their fury, they might puncture the tires with their elongated incisors or rip long gashes in the chassis. My eardrums felt as if they were being broken by the barking and I was sweating because it was still well over 100 degrees outside the car and a dozen degrees hotter inside.

So... We sat in the car for a while. After a few minutes, the spaniel settled down a bit and the pigs stopped circling. My eardrums still throbbed, but most of the drama seemed to have subsided. That's when the javelina began humping each other. Great, I thought. I'm going to die of heat exhaustion while watching pigs fornicate.

At last, they stopped and ambled off around the side of the house. I grabbed the dog firmly by the leash and gallumped quickly from the carport to the front door. I stepped inside and ping! ping! a new leak in the living room, but at least that was all that was happening. I slumped down onto a chair, exhausted.

And then my arms begins to itch. They were bloody and scraped by thorns. I tried to remember if these were the kind of thorns that can give people allergic reactions. I hoped not, and by the next morning, my arms were fine. Still, when I saw those pigs gaining on us out there in the sticky chamisa, I started wondering why I simply had to make the desert my home.

Be careful what you wish for. Not long after the last stitches were removed from my knee, economic pressures convinced me that I needed to look for a full-time job away from Tucson. After ten years in one place, I didn't want to leave the desert home that I'd come to love, but such forced rootlessness is a common American story these days. Nevertheless, I hoped that maybe, in a few years' time when the economy stabilized, I'd be able to return home. So I made the leap: sent out applications, struggled through a few rounds of interviews, and landed a job. A good job, but, alas, far away in the South. I'll be living in the mountains of North Carolina and they are beautiful. If I'd never heard the desert at dawn, never smelled creosote after a rain, never lived under these deep blue skies for so long, then the Great Smoky Mountains would be just fine. Still, the desert runs in my veins.

If I project myself ahead a few months to that moment when the U-Haul is filled and I'm driving east, I imagine that I'll have tears in my eyes as I cross the Mississippi. Sure, there'll be plenty of excitement about the prospect of a secure, well-paid job, but the landscape will be so different. How will I manage without hearing the contented grunts and snuffles of javelinas each morning?

My only consolation comes from the fact that I'll have a new landscape to explore. I hear there's a flock of wild turkeys that prowls the few acres surrounding my new rental home and the occasional groundhog shuffles by.

Better than that, a new colleague, knowing my affinity for the wild "pigs" of my desert home, just sent me a clipping. It's about a true member of the swine family, another creature that roams the southern woodlands--the wild hog, Sus scrofa. However, these pigs are much larger than their desert cousins: piglets about twice the size of javelina babies and adults four to six times as big. These pigs are descendents of introduced, foreign species and have become quite a

management problem. Still, I can't wait to see one. If I do, maybe then I'll feel as if I've come home.