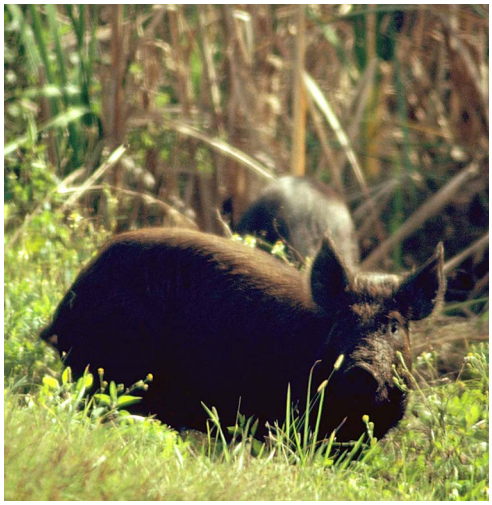
Hogs on Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge

Feral Hog (*Sus scrofa*)

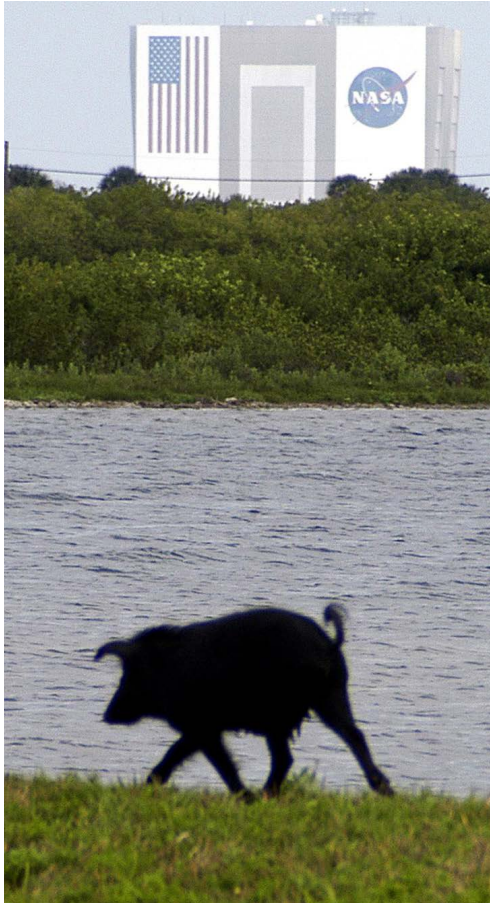
Feral hogs are an exotic species which were first introduced to Florida, and to North America, in 1539 by Spanish colonizers. They were used by early settlers as a source of food. Feral hogs have undoubtedly hybridized with free ranging pigs in the area over the last four centuries. Since their introduction, feral hogs have been documented in every Florida County and in all areas of the refuge.

To control feral hog numbers, the refuge started a feral hog removal program in 1972. Currently, hog-trappers permitted by the refuge remove about 2,000 hogs annually.



Feral hogs on Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (credit: USFWS)

Damage by feral hogs has been observed in almost all refuge habitats. Feral hogs do immense damage to native plant and animal communities. Their rooting of the soils provides a means for invasive plants to spread. Feral hogs are omnivorous and feed on a variety of foods available on Merritt Island NWR. The hogs present a direct threat to sea turtle nests, where their keen sense of smell allows them to locate and predate visually hidden nests. From 2010-2012, feral hogs predated 276 sea turtle nests on the refuge. Feral hogs also compete with native wildlife for food and upset the balance of the ecosystem.



Feral hog in front of Vehicle Assembly Building on NASA's Kennedy Space Center (credit: NASA)

Feral hog rooting can be seen along roadways and dikes; a behavior which creates additional maintenance costs to the refuge.

Feral hogs can carry 45 diseases and parasites, eight of which can infect humans. The more feral hog populations increase and expand, the greater the chances are that they may transmit diseases to other wildlife and humans. Over 1 million visitors use the refuge annually, and thousands of Kennedy Space Center employees use refuge roads to commute to work each day. Feral hogs can be a hazard to visitors and employees. A sow protecting her young can be very aggressive toward humans. Each year, half of all vehicle strikes with wildlife involve hogs. Over the past four years, 67 vehicle strikes have involved hogs.

Breeding occurs year-round with females producing an average of one to two litters per year. Litters range in size from four to twelve. Feral hogs are so adaptable and the refuge so large and remote that total eradication is not believed to be economically feasible. Therefore, feral hog control is a continuing process requiring constant effort.

Sea turtle nest destroyed by feral hogs on Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (credit: USFWS)

Hog rooting damage along highway on Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Hog rooting causes erosion along roads and dikes. (credit: USFWS)

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