

Writer Travis Marshall and photographer Morgan Eddington embark on one of the South's riskiest and up and coming sports...

haww'g huntin'

"You want to shoot it or stab it?" Fischer asks me on the phone as I'm arranging my custom hunt. "Most people want to stab 'em."

Days later, in the back of a mud-splattered 4WD pickup, dogs whine and scrape at the doors of their cage as we pull to the side of a rutted dirt track. Joe Fischer and Phillip Dickerson, local hunting guides of the good ol' boy variety, train these dogs from birth for a single purpose: tracking feral hogs. And they live for it. When Fischer cracks the door to the cage, the muzzles, tongues and paws of a seemingly uncountable number of canines push through the cracks, and when he lets it fly on its hinges, the barking mass spills onto the ground. As a pack, they're on the scent before they even catch their balance. "Let 'em go," Fischer says. "When they start barking we'll know they've got one." It's maybe 7 a.m., already a little late for hog hunting—these nocturnal animals are often well on their way to bed by this time of day—but within just a few minutes, I hear what he means. When the pack catches up with its quarry, the dogs "bay" the pig (surround it), usually in a clump of Lowcountry swamp brush, and bark at the top of their lungs from all sides to keep it penned into the area. The change in the dogs' cries is unmistakable, even for a first time hunter such as myself. The hunt has already begun.



Hog hauling. One hog hunter triumphantly carries his kill to the car.



How to: Hunt hogs

WHERE TO HUNT: Hogs are pretty much everywhere—from the less developed areas of north, south and west of Savannah—all the way out to the islands.

WHEN TO GO: Hogs can be hunted year 'round. Though the colder months, roughly November to March, are more productive, as the porkers will be out and about later into the day. Pigs don't have sweat glands so when the weather heats up, hogs tend to bed down somewhere cool.

WHAT TO BRING: On private property, hunters with permission from the landowner are free to hunt pretty much how they please and only require a hunting license. To hunt in public Wildlife Management Areas (WMA), hunters need to be aware of the current game season, and have the appropriate licenses and weapons. During deer season, hog hunters need a big-game license; in small-game season, hog hunters are restricted to use only small game weapons such as a .22 rifle or a shotgun, to prevent hunters from taking regulated animals, like deer or turkey, out of season.

Hunting licenses can be purchased online at the georgiawildlife.dnr.state.ga.us, select Wal-Mart stores and any DNR office.

WHO TO GO WITH: For first time and aspiring hunters, guides and hunting operators can provide all the tools and knowledge needed for a successful hunt. There are several good hunting guides and operators in the Savannah area and rates start at about \$250 per day:

- Joe Fischer and Phillip Dickerson (left) – 912.667.5104
- Gohagan's Guide Service – www.gohagansguideservice.com
- Broughton Island Boars – www.bislandboars.com
- Cypress Creek – www.cypresscreekhunting.com
- Bostic Plantation – www.bostick-plantation.com
- Egan Hill Plantation – www.eganhill.com

Once we slip into knee waders and collect our hunting gear—a four-inch hunting knife, .357 revolver and one muscle-bound pit bull on a chain for backup—we ford the roadside canal and push through the low-lying shrubs and spider webs, making our way toward the frantic barking. Ten minutes of slogging through the swampy forest that surrounds the private cornfield that we're here to protect and we're getting close. Fischer stops short, looks at me with a furrowed brow and puts his finger to his lips in the universal signal for "keep your mouth shut, noob." Then he slips the revolver into my hand. "We're



Dog days: Philip Dickerson and his pack of hunting dogs have a good time running through the woods.

gonna creep around this side," he whispers, gesturing with his left hand. "When you see the hog through the bushes, make sure you've got a clean shot, and take it down." We move around the perimeter and the telltale snout



Bay dogs can pick up a scent as old as four hours and the hunters amble through the forest until the dogs have cornered or "bayed" the prey. Then, the catch dog is unleashed—taking the hog down and pinning it to the ground.

comes into view, then the light-tan body begins to take shape through the leaves and branches. Almost 150 pounds of sow now stands before me, frozen momentarily, as dogs stand jumping and barking all around her. With a mixture of relief

and regret, I lower the pistol to my side. I came here to shoot a pig, not a dog, and I decide I don't want it bad enough to risk a shot with the dogs so close. Just as I turn to explain my dilemma to Fischer, a hole opens up in the

pack, leaving the pig a clear escape path away from her canine captors. She bolts for the one thing standing in her way: me. With visions of cloven hoof-prints dancing across my chest, I raise the pistol, crack off a shot from the hip and the charging sow takes a nosedive not ten feet from my knocking knees. Fischer slaps me on the back. "Nice shot, John Wayne," he says

with a laugh. My voice cracks with the complete opposite of confidence when I ask what would've become of me had I missed. "Aw, she probably would've just bumped into you—it ain't like she's got any tusks or

Pig Tracks

Want to track your pig like a pro? Brush up on your hog huntin' lingo and learn the signs that pigs leave behind.

"Wallows": An imprint in muddy ground of the lengthwise shape of a pig's body where the hog has stopped to roll in the muck and cool off.

"Rub": Clumps of hair and/or mud stuck to the side of a tree (often found close to wallows), about knee to waist height, where the pig has scratched itself.

"Rootin' spots": Pigs dig up the ground with their noses when they feed. An area of freshly turned earth on the forest floor is a sure sign of porky feeding activity.

"Scat": One of the hardest signs to positively I.D., hog droppings can vary in appearance depending on the pig's diet. If large quantities of droppings are found within a small area, chances are good that hogs have been feeding close by.

"Hoof prints": Similar to deer tracks, hog prints have two "toes," rounded at the tips and sometimes spread apart.

anything," Fischer answers in his jocular Georgia drawl.

This is hog hunting, Lowcountry style. It's an activity of necessity as much as it is one of sport. These swine are invasive, omnivorous pests that will eat just about anything—from grain, roots and acorns to carrion, livestock and earthworms—they're pigs after all. "They turn over food plots and front yards, damage roads and destroy endangered native plant species and the natural habitats of native animal species in their hunt for food," explains David Mixon, game management supervisor for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "And the hog population grows fast. One female can produce three litters annually, with 10 to 15 piglets per litter."

Hogs aren't actually native to North America, so all of our hogs today, feral or otherwise, are descendents of livestock brought over from Europe as early as 1498. Different colors, shapes and sizes—from squat, fat farm-style piggies to the lean, long-toothed

razorbacks of Southern lore—can be found running wild all around Savannah's perimeter, across Georgia and much of the U.S. for that matter. These days, they all fall under the blanket term—"feral hog." Adult hogs usually grow to be about three feet in height, weighing anywhere from 100 to 500 pounds depending on their access to food and how hard they have to work to get it. And while they range pretty much anywhere they can find food and shelter, feral hogs generally prefer the cover of dense brush for protection. When the temperature rises, however, the swine spend much of their time wallowing in swamps, wetlands, ponds and streams close to protective cover.

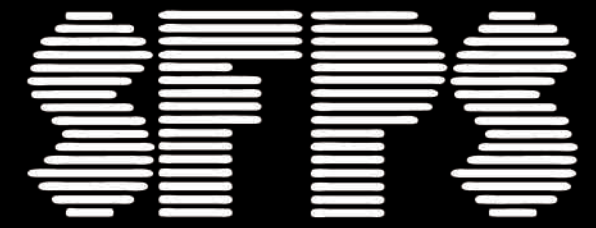
As a sport, hog hunting comes in many flavors. The hard-core outdoorsman can crawl through the brush of late dusk or early dawn, examining pig signs and stalking prey on their wits alone. Pigs can be hunted from a blind with a hunting rifle or bow-and-arrow or on private land, with the appropriate per-

Audio | Video | Lighting | FX



(912) 236-1345

www.sfpsrental.net



STAGE FRONT
Production Services



>> Upgrade Your Telephone System.
>> Discover the Next Generation of Toshiba Telephones.





Call us to find out about Toshiba's 7 Year Warranty >> **912.354.8900** >> 2141 Rowland Ave | Savannah, GA | www.speros.com

Biggest Pigs

mits, they can be attracted by bait at night and shot under 12-volt lighting. One of the most efficient and effective ways to hunt hogs is with dogs. Hunting guides like Fischer and Dickerson, or any of the hunting plantations scattered around the Savannah area, use well-trained hunting dogs to offer softer-skinned stalkers with a penchant for pig sticking a virtually guaranteed, customized killing experience.

Shoot or stab? I ponder my decision and see the dog-hunting technique first-hand when Fischer loans me a DVD of some of his past hunts. There are two types of dogs: "bay" dogs, in my case Catahoula and Parker Curs, and a fiercer breed, like a pit bull, known as the "catch" dog. Bay dogs can pick up a scent as old as four hours and the hunters amble through the forest until the dogs have cornered or "bayed" the prey. Then, the catch dog is

"Hogzilla" first entered the hog-hunting lexicon in June 2004 when Chris Griffin took down a monster-sized hog near Alapaha, Georgia, that he claimed measured 12 feet long and weighed approximately 1000 lbs. *National Geographic Explorer* performed post-mortem forensics on the beast five months later, and concluded it was actually eight feet long and 800 lbs, though Griffin stands by his original measurements. The same tests also determined that the pig came from a mix of wild and domestic stock. Since then, other monster hogs have come to light. In May 2007, 11-year-old Jamison Stone shot and killed a 1050 pound hog deemed "Monster Pig" in Alabama measuring nine feet and four inches using a .50 caliber hand gun. The following month Roger Hosefelt, took down a similarly sized porker dubbed "Boss Hawg" on the Egan Hill plantation near Fargo, Georgia. While skeptics question whether any of these were really "wild" hogs, David Mixon of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources reveals that hogs of this size are not impossible to find outside of captivity if they have open access to the right kind of food, "You could easily pen a wild hog, and fatten it up to that size," he says. "Hogzilla had access to high-protein catfish food, that's how it got so big."

See more giant hogs at www.monsterpig.com

unleashed—taking the hog down and pinning it to the ground. This allows the guides to grab the swine by the legs and hold it belly-up while the hunters make quick work of the beast with their weapon of choice. In my pre-hunt DVD, the killers are clad head-toe in camo and whooping



Prolific porker:
11-year-old Jamison Stone reportedly shot 1050 pound Monster Pig in May '07.

...the killers are clad head-to-toe in camo and whooping encouragements like "git 'er done" and "stick that pig" before thrusting their knives up to the hilt to the tune of *Deliverance*-style pig squealing and licking the blood from their dripping blade.

encouragements like "git 'er done" and "stick that pig" before thrusting their knives up to the hilt to the tune of *Deliverance*-style pig squealing and licking the blood from their dripping blade.

"I think I'll shoot it if you don't mind," I decide. "I understand," Fischer says as we walk through the forest. "Honestly, I get worried that some of those guys will go home and stick their wives afterward. And all that blood licking, that's disgusting. I bet those people get sick something awful."

Having dispatched my pig with what I hope is a minimum of pain, suffering and squealing, it's time to take on the task of dressing the animal; getting it home and butchered before the flesh goes bad in the sweltering Georgia summer heat, which Fischer explains can happen in as little as an hour on a hot day. Because of restrictive USDA regulations, it's almost impossible to find a butcher in the Savannah area willing to dress a wild hog. Hunters mostly take on this duty themselves—and hunting guides will often butcher the pig as part of the experience.

Fischer doesn't have any qualms about undertaking this role. With a hunter's skill, he makes a slit up the belly and deftly removes the guts before looping a chain around the upper jaw and dragging the carcass back to the truck. Back at the house we toss a rope over the low-hanging branch of a tree, hoist the hog up by its hind legs and hose it down while it spins spread-eagle. Fischer makes cuts in the skin around each of the four legs and peels the hide down over the hindquarters, slicing through the

fat that connects it to the muscle. With the skin hanging inside-out like a macabre cape, he uses a hefty butcher's knife and hack saw to remove the backstrap (the loin running on either side of the spine), shoulders (front legs), hams (back legs) and ribs, and puts them on ice in a large cooler.

The majority of the meat stacked neatly in the freezer, I set about making my first meal. A wild animal, the meat of a feral pig is less fatty and much tougher than farm-raised pork. This makes a stiff marinade and a slow cooking process a requirement not to be ignored. After soaking the backstrap in an orange and lime-based Cuban Mojo sauce for 48 hours, I pop it in the oven on low heat until the meat reaches the requisite 170 degrees (to kill any risk of trichinosis) and sit down to a dinner that puts every pork chop I've ever tasted to shame. —ts

Trust your movers.

TRUST: [ˈtruːst] noun – 1. reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, surety, of a person or thing; confidence.



SAVANNAH MOVING
912.272.7996 • www.savannahmoving.com



Serving Savannah and the surrounding areas for over a decade • Specialize in residential, commercial and office installation

Discover the world around you.



Thanks Savannah!
for voting us Savannah's Best
Auto Dealer 2007 and 2008



Grainger Honda
"The People's Choice"
www.graingerhonda.com

View our website graingerhonda.com
Chatham Parkway @I-16 • Garden City, GA

Toll free 1-888-214-0563