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Jim Gilbert displays a photo of wild hogs rooting through and tearing up his backyard landscape.

Pushed from their habitat, hogs meet up with people

The wild pigs are invading Sun City Center backyards, where they destroy property and threaten the safety of its senior residents.

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When Pete Pullen stumbled across three baby wild hogs on a patch of land near his home, he knew he had to back away immediately. The piglets were harmless, but he was sure their mother was nearby.

"If you get between a mother and her babies, you get attacked," Pullen, 77, said. "And I can't run as fast as I used to."

Pullen was used to seeing wild hogs outside his home in Sun City Center, an expansive retirement community in Hillsborough County covering about eight square miles. The hogs hang out in his backyard, root through his grass and eat from his mango tree. But his encounter with the three babies was too close for comfort.

Their mother was probably
See HOGS, 5B



Courtesy of Jim Gilbert

Relocated from their natural environs due to new development, the hogs dig into Sun City backyards.

HOGS continued from 1B

a couple hundred pounds, he guessed, and a grunt coming from the tall grass nearby indicated she was close. He didn't stick around to find out.

Wild hogs can weigh up to 350 pounds, reach speeds of 35 miles per hour and grow 6-inch tusks "like daggers," according to bow hunter Tommy Sievert.

While hogs can be a nuisance year round, Pullen and his neighbors have been dealing with a surge of the unwelcome visitors for weeks. They blame new housing developments in the surrounding area for pushing the pigs out of their natural habitats and into their backyards.

Desperate to protect their property and themselves, many residents have requested help from hunters and trappers like Sievert. Hunting with a rifle would be too dangerous in the small, populated neighborhoods of Sun City Center, so a small army of volunteers are going after the pigs with bows and arrows, hunting dogs and knives.

Wild hogs were brought to Florida in the 1500s by Spanish explorers and can now be found in every county in the state. The invasive species causes more than \$1.5 billion in property damage and control costs across the country each year, according to the USDA.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has only received two reports of people having physical incidents with feral hogs in Hillsborough since 2017. One resulted in injuries to a trapper's thumb and thigh in Lithia in July 2021; in the other, a person was reportedly chased into a house by an aggressive hog on Aug. 5, records show.

Statewide, there have been 24 incidents reported between wild hogs and people over the last five years, seven of them resulting in injuries to people. Four of those

injuries have occurred this year.

In Hillsborough, Pullen and his neighbors are eager for a break from the hogs. The animals are destroying backyards and disturbing the peace in their quiet 55 and older community.

"It's open season all season for pigs," Pullen said.

'They're like a plow'

These pigs like to play favorites. Some residents in Sun City Center say the hogs have chosen their properties specifically as go-to spots.

"They seem to love my yard for some reason," said Jim Gilbert, 67, president of his homeowners association in Sun City Center. "They've been destroying everything around me for years and we had no idea they existed until we moved in. I guess they were waiting for me."

Wild hogs search for food by rooting their snouts through the ground, creating ruts up to five inches deep.

"They're like a plow," Gilbert said. "I've tried every remedy you can find in the stores or online, and they just keep coming back"

In an email to the Tampa Bay Times, the Fish and Wildlife Commission suggested residents use electric or physical fences to keep pigs off their land. But many homeowners associations within Sun City Center don't allow fencing of any kind.

Dan Osborne, another resident, says he hasn't seen the pigs himself, but he knows they're visiting his property. He often wakes up to see his yard badly damaged by the pigs' rooting.

He recently had his yard treated for grubs, which the hogs like to eat, in an effort to deter them from coming onto his land. He once hired a landscaper to repair the damage, only for the pigs to return days later.

"Let's just say my backyard is not all on one level," Osborne said. But he doesn't blame the hogs for

their behavior, he said, as they're probably just searching for food and space.

"Unfortunately, we're pushing the wildlife out of their habitat with all that development," Osborne said. "They have to go somewhere."

Osborne and other neighbors worry for their small dogs. People in the community don't let their dogs out without a leash and their pets remain indoors for most the day, but the hogs still are a threatening presence. If they get agitated or defensive, they could charge pets or people, hog hunters say.

Luckily, wild hogs usually will flee if humans get too close.

"It is a senior community," Gilbert said. "A lot of the people walking around here don't walk that fast."

'It grows exponentially'

The neighborhoods of Sun City Center present a unique challenge to hunters trying to diminish the hog population. With woods in such close proximity to residential streets, it's not safe or practical to



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Jim Gilbert points out areas in his backyard lawn where groups of wild hogs have repeatedly dug up in search of food.

use a gun.

Tommy Sievert learned of the community's hog problem while scrolling through TikTok several weeks ago, and he reached out to Pullen that day with his offer to help. He and his partner Tommy Bass use bows to hunt.

While the noise from a rifle would both disturb residents and scare off nearby hogs, a bow and arrow is a quieter alternative. Its shorter range makes it a safer option when hunting near populated areas.

Because wild hogs are invasive, you can hunt them year round and without a hunting license as long as you have the property owner's permission. Sievert and Bass, who are from Ocala, are among a group of hunters and outdoors enthusiasts who have offered to help out in Sun City Center free of charge.

The hunters say they don't waste any of the animal once it's dead; they eat what they can and donate the rest of the meat to shelters or community centers.

When Sievert saw Pullen's video of a massive hog in his backyard, he grew worried for the residents'

safety. "That was my main concern when I first saw that footage," Sievert said, "I was thinking like, 'Oh man, that's going to hurt somebody.'"

Sievert and Bass set up trail cameras in Sun City Center to track the hogs' patterns and behavior. Once the men get a clear idea of the hogs' routine, they'll plan a day and time for a hunt.

They hope they can thin out the hog population before they cause more significant damage, Sievert said. "It's only a matter of time before they root up some irrigation or some plumbing and it'll start costing a lot more money than landscaping sod," he said.

Dylan O'Dell and Nate Jackson, who both use cur dogs to hunt, already have killed a few pigs in Sun City Center. They're in touch with Pullen and are happy to help him with his unwelcome guests.

Jackson, who uses a knife to make the hogs' death as quick and humane as possible, says his dogs can follow a scent trail through a large area of woods. Once the dogs find the pig in question, they'll corner it and eventually attack.

Like many of the residents, Jackson attributes the increased hog presence in Sun City Center to new developments nearby. "The hogs are being pushed into very small areas of woods and come out into yards because there's not enough food or space for them," he said. "It's a huge issue, this overbuilding."

Pullen thinks the hunters will be able to reduce the pigs' numbers, but he's not expecting a silver bullet for his hog problem. The animals breed often, and as development continues, he expects more of them to wander onto his land.

"No matter what we do, there's going to be more," Pullen said. "It grows exponentially."

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