



The Collared Peccary



Of all the fascinating animals visitors may encounter in Big Bend, perhaps the most distinctive is the collared peccary (*Tayassu tajacu*), commonly called the javelina. Often mistaken for a pig, the javelina is a unique inhabitant of the desert Southwest.

Javelina versus Pigs

Although javelinas may superficially resemble wild boars and domestic pigs, these species of animals are not closely related and have been evolutionarily distinct for millions of years. Below is a comparison between the two animals, highlighting some important differences:

	Javelina	Pigs
<i>Classification</i>	Family Tayassuidae	Family Suidae
<i>Origin</i>	Native to the Americas	Introduced from Europe
<i>Size</i>	40-60 pounds	Up to 400 pounds
<i>Stomach</i>	Complex stomach	Simple stomach
<i>Scent Gland</i>	Scent gland present	No scent gland
<i>Teeth</i>	38 small and straight teeth	34 or 44 long curved teeth
<i>Legs</i>	Limb bones partially fused	Limb bones not fused
<i>Tail</i>	Short tail	Long tail

Not as important?

The diminutive, pig-like appearance of the javelina has long led humans to regard the animal differently than other Chihuahuan Desert wildlife. Not as “attractive” as white-tail deer and pronghorn antelope or as “romantic” as the black bear, early settlers to the region regarded the javelina at best as a nuisance animal.

Prior to the establishment of the park in 1944, javelinas enjoyed no special protection. Mexican hunters received one dollar per animal hide, leading to the removal of javelina by the herd.

One observer stated, “Javelinas have been killed for their hides, and shot by hunters merely for something to shoot at.” By the mid-1930s, javelina in Big Bend seemed destined to be hunted to extinction.

Since 1944, the javelina population in Big Bend has enjoyed the same level of protection as other species. No longer regarded as a nuisance, the javelina is now recognized to be an integral part of the Chihuahuan desert ecosystem, an animal worthy of study. Research has expanded our knowledge of the behavior and lifecycle of javelina in the park.

Characteristics

Originating in South America, the range of the javelina has extended north into Texas since the 1700s. Built low and close to the ground, javelinas stand about 18 inches tall and are between 32 and 36 inches long. An average adult weighs 40 to 60 pounds.

They have coarse salt-and-pepper fur with a band of white around the neck, giving the appearance of a collar. A mane of darker hair on the back of the neck and shoulders will bristle when the animal faces danger. Javelinas have an excellent sense of smell, average hearing, and poor eyesight. Their sensitive pink noses help them locate underground roots as well as a nearby predator.

A scent gland located just above the short tail gives off a strong, musky odor. Members of a herd often stand head to rump and rub their necks on their herd mate’s scent gland. This behavior enables all herd members to quickly identify one another or a stranger.

The basic social unit is the herd, which has an average of 12 individuals. Members of a herd mark their territory by rubbing their scent glands on rocks, shrubs, and trees. Each herd needs an area of about 750 acres, in which there will be a network of trails leading to water, food, and shelter.

Food, Shelter, and Family

Javelinas are active during the cooler parts of the day; in the summer, this means early morning and early evening. They prefer large trees, caves, and rocky overhangs to get away from the midday sun and to hide from predators.

Chiefly vegetarian, javelinas feed on a variety of desert plants, cactus stems, pads and fruits, agave hearts, lechuguilla, mesquite beans, roots, and flowers. An occasional insect or bird egg may be added to the menu. One of the javelina's favorite foods is the prickly pear cactus. They use their sharp, two-inch long canine teeth to shred and consume the pads, spines and all. During late summer the fruits begin to ripen and like many desert animals, javelina eat them.

Babies are usually born during the summer rainy season when food is more plentiful. Females can have two litters per year. The babies weigh one pound at birth and after the first day, are able to walk and follow the herd. After nursing for eight weeks, they begin eating solid food. The reddish-brown babies are miniature versions of their parents. They are very vocal as they follow the adults, grunting and squealing for food and attention.

An afternoon nap provides the perfect time for the little ones to play. While the adults sleep, the babies enjoy climbing on top and then sliding down the backs of the grownups. The adults are very patient with the babies, but will give them a warning when they have had enough.

The entire herd will defend youngsters against predators. A baby who strays from the safety of the herd may become the meal of a bobcat, coyote, or mountain lion.

Javelinas and People

In the wild, javelinas have a natural fear of humans. When given the chance, they will run away if people get too close. If an animal feels cornered or is protecting its young, it can act aggressively towards people or their pets. The javelina's pig-like appearance and seemingly gentle nature can fool visitors into thinking that the animal is harmless. In recent years, visitors attempting to feed javelina have been bitten.

Do not feed any native wildlife. Human food is not good for javelinas or other wild creatures, nor do they require our food to supplement their diet. The desert truly provides everything they need!

Unfortunately, however, many javelinas now include human food as part of their diet. While normally docile, javelina can be aggressive when food is involved. Protect yourselves and the javelina by properly storing all your food inside your vehicle or in the food storage lockers provided in the campgrounds. Do not leave coolers or food boxes unattended on picnic tables or in a tent. Flatten tents when you are away from your campsite. It is important that javelinas and all park animals eat their natural food sources to stay healthy and safe. With your help, these unique animals can continue to thrive and thrill park visitors for years to come.

For More Information

Bissonette, John A. [Ecology and Social Behavior of the Collared Peccary in Big Bend National Park \(Scientific monograph series; no. 16\)](#). Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1982.

Lowell, Susan. [The Three Little Javelinas](#). Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Publishing, 1992.

Lowell, Susan. [Josefina Javelina: A Hairy Tale](#). Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon, 2005.

Sowls, Lyle K. [Javelinas and other Peccaries: Their Biology, Management, and Use](#). College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. Second Edition.

Storad, Conrad J. [Don't Call Me Pig! : A Javelina Story](#). Tempe, AZ: Resort Gifts Unlimited, 1999.



Brake for javelina!

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