

Invasive Species

A sudden increase in a new species in a habitat is another change that affects migratory animals. Animals that are transplanted or moved because of human activity—as may occur when insects travel on imported exotic plants or pets escape—can thrive in new environments. If enough of these animals survive and can breed, they can become invasive. Because they were artificially moved from one habitat to another and don't make a return journey, these animals are termed **invasive species** and are not considered migratory. These invasive species can quickly outcompete the native animals because they often have advantages in their new habitat that they didn't need to evolve.

For instance, invasive species often arrive in regions where there are few predators that recognize them as food. One example is the Burmese python (*Python bivittatus*), which is native to Southeast Asia but has been imported as a pet in Florida and subsequently released. Pythons are voracious eaters and breeders and have few Floridian predators large enough to eat them. Migratory birds are especially susceptible to these snakes because the pythons not only eat adult birds, but they also eat the birds' eggs. Native snakes also predate on migratory birds, but they are much more common in the environment, and so the birds have evolved to spot and defend themselves from the native snakes, but not the invasive ones.

Feral hogs (*Sus domesticus*) are domesticated pigs that live in the wild without human intervention or care (Figure 66). Humans brought domesticated pigs to North America in the 1500s and released them to establish a free-range food source. The domesticated pigs quickly reverted to a wild state and escaped from human care. In North America, there is a lack of predators that can effectively hunt feral hogs. They can eat almost anything and can compete with other wildlife for food. Due to these advantages and their high reproductive rate—they can have multiple litters a year—they have been spreading across the United States and Canada.

Feral hogs are major disease carriers. Invasive species can carry diseases that are less harmful to themselves but are highly contagious to other wildlife. Feral hogs carry at least thirty different diseases that can be passed on to humans, domesticated animals, and wildlife. Because they are descendants of domesticated animals, feral hogs are adapted to living near humans. Roaming in groups of thirty to fifty, feral hogs are bold and aggressive animals that are less fearful of people than most other wild animals. Worldwide, on average 8.6 human deaths occur as a result of feral hog attacks each year.

FIGURE 66



Two feral hogs near Kennedy Space Center, Florida.⁶⁷