

Occurrence of Feral Dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*) in Northwest Texas: An Observation

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ABSTRACT

The distribution of feral dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*) in Texas has not been well documented. This report discusses several observations of feral dogs in northwest Texas and the implications of these observations to cattle and wildlife.

KEYWORDS: *Canis lupus familiaris*, feral dogs, livestock, northwest Texas

Populations of feral dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*) have been documented in many areas of the United States (Green and Gipson 1994). Because of their potential negative impacts to wildlife and livestock (Denney 1974, Boggess et al. 1978, Lowry and McArthur 1978), information concerning populations of feral dogs is important to biologists and the public. Despite reportedly occurring in all 50 states (Green and Gipson 1994), feral dogs have not been well documented in Texas. Additionally, specimens of feral dogs are poorly represented in museum collections, and no records are from northwest Texas. Populations of feral dogs in northwest Texas are reported, and a specimen collected for The Museum, Texas Tech University, is described.

In northwest Texas, free-ranging dogs, presumed to be feral, were observed by the authors on several occasions from 1998 to 2001. In past studies, dogs were considered feral if they did not wear collars, avoided human contact, and formed packs (Scott and Causey 1973, Gipson 1983, Daniels and Bekoff 1989). Although some dogs observed probably were not feral, subsequent information obtained by the authors suggested that most dogs were feral. Small packs (3-6 dogs) observed by the authors were always associated with cattle feedyards in northern Moore and southern Sherman counties. These observations were consistent with previous researchers that reported feral dog packs of 2-7 individuals (Beck 1973, Scott and Causey 1973, Nesbitt 1975, Gipson 1983).

On December 15, 2000, a female feral dog was collected on U.S. Highway 54, 5 km southwest of Stratford, Sherman County. This particular dog was observed by the authors earlier that week traveling with other feral dogs in a nearby field. Based on tooth wear (Gipson et al. 2000), this dog was approximately 3-4 years old. Inspection of her

reproductive tract indicated she had never bred. Standard measurements were: total body length, 43.3 in; hind foot length, 7.3 in; tail length, 12.2 in; ear length, 4.3 in; shoulder height, 16.7; and body mass, 30.8 lb. The dog had dark mottled coloration, and thus was a mongrel, or mixed breed. Mongrel dogs often develop after a few generations of uncontrolled breeding among feral dogs (Green and Gipson 1994). This specimen (TTU 85505) is deposited in The Museum, Texas Tech University, Lubbock. Based on a search of records from museums in Texas and New Mexico, this is the first specimen of *C. lupus familiaris* from northwest Texas.

Because feral dogs appeared to be associated with cattle feedyards, the authors used a standard questionnaire to interview managers of 12 cattle feedyards in six counties to determine the status of feral dogs in other areas of northwest Texas (Table 1). The results of the questionnaire suggest that populations of feral dogs are not widespread in northwest Texas, however, isolated populations regularly occur in some areas (Table 1).

Table 1. Manager responses from 12 cattle feedyards in northwest Texas relative to feral dogs status for the previous 5 years. Pack sizes reportedly ranged from 3 to 5, but sometimes up to 10 feral dogs.

County	Observations of feral dogs	Observations \geq 1 per month	Feral dogs in packs	Annual killings of feral dogs
Dallam	No	---	---	---
Dallam	No	---	---	---
Deaf Smith	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Deaf Smith	No	---	---	---
Hansford	No	---	---	---
Hansford	Yes	No	No	No
Hansford	No	---	---	---
Hartley	Yes	No	No	No
Hartley	No	---	---	---
Moore	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Moore	Yes	No	No	No
Sherman	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Although populations of feral dogs can persist independent of humans in natural areas (Scott and Causey 1973, Green and Gipson 1994), most populations are dependent on human habitations for permanent sources of food and recruitment of new dogs. For example, populations of feral dogs were primarily dependent on large garbage dumps for food in Alabama (Scott and Causey 1973), Alaska (Gipson 1983), and Arizona (Daniels and Bekoff 1989). Similarly, populations of feral dogs were dependent on poultry carrion from large-scale poultry farms in Arkansas (Gipson and Sealander 1976) and Nebraska (Mahan et al. 1978). Feral dogs can reproduce in the wild (Green and Gipson 1994), however, many populations persist due to recruitment of free-ranging dogs from human habitation (Scott and Causey 1973).

Populations of feral dogs in northwest Texas were likely dependent on cattle carrion, because feral dogs occurred near feedyards where dead cattle often were left in carcass pits. It is unknown if feral dog populations reproduced; however, nearby towns likely were a source of free-ranging dogs to maintain populations. Absence or non-enforcement of dog control programs, leash laws, and spay or neuter programs in rural towns contribute to high dog numbers that are sources of feral dog populations (Daniels and Bekoff 1989). In addition to scavenging, feral dogs can be important predators of livestock (Denney 1974, Boggess et al. 1978). Feral dogs also can have negative impacts on wildlife by killing prey species, including deer, *Odocoileus hemionus* and *O.*

virginianus (Denney 1974, Lowry and McArthur 1978). In northwest Texas, feral dogs were not a serious threat to livestock as there were no reports of feral dogs killing livestock. However, feral dogs possibly had negative impacts on wildlife, especially in areas surrounding the towns where feral dogs regularly formed packs. Future research should attempt to determine the ecology of feral dogs in northwest Texas.

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