

Javelinas

Those of you who are not gardeners may wonder what these elusive desert dwellers have to do with desert landscapes. You only have to mention the name javelina in gardening circles to elicit a plethora of stories, both sad and funny, about the depredations visited on our otherwise peaceful patios and gardens by these wild denizens of our brushy arroyos.

Despite popular belief, javelinas (family Tayassuidae) are not pigs (family Suidae). Nor are they rodents. They are peccaries and javelinas are the smallest of three existing peccary species. Found only in North and South America, javelinas are relative newcomers to Arizona. Javelina sightings were not recorded until the mid 1700s.

My experience with these “not pigs” is much more recent, coinciding with the addition of a large number of prickly pear cactus to my nursery...a number that immediately began to dwindle. At first I blamed the nighttime raids on rabbits and pack rats, but soon realized that the shredded damage several feet off of the ground meant that, (A) I had some pretty monster-sized rodents or bunnies or (B) there was some other culprit. Shortly thereafter, we started noticing freshly planted flowers uprooted, dog food containers spilled and bags of bird seed drug into the yard. These attacks always occurred at night and we never heard a thing. Once I came to understand who the true marauders were (by way of telltale hoof prints), it has become my obsession to catch them in the act.

My first idea was to employ the use of a strategically placed motion sensor, connected to a warning beeper in my bedroom. Not my craftiest move. After a few days of my cat, the neighbor's cat, and miscellaneous otherwise nameless cats setting the beeper off at all hours of the night and the whole motion sensor strategy was re-thought. My next tactic involved a motion sensing camera (installed a comfortable distance from my bedroom) focused on the now very small and very chewed up remains of my prickly pears.

Probably the best strategy to deal with javelina pillaging is to remove attractants like pet food, quail blocks, garbage and the forage plants that javelina like to dine on. The latter is perhaps the hardest to deal with since they will try and nibble on almost anything green at least once. A javelina resistant plant list can be found on the Arizona Game and Fish web site. I have also heard of local gardeners using substances like powdered fox urine, cayenne pepper, ammonia and moth balls in the areas that have been uprooted in an attempt to discourage peccaries.

In the mean time, on any given night, I may be found putting my insomnia to good use by sitting on my back patio curled up in a blanket, armed with a flashlight and camera, waiting...listening.