

## Seeing in the dark: Night hunting for hogs blends high tech, old school

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Provided by Lizard Lope Lodge

### If you go

#### Lizard Lope Lodge

**Where:** Just south of Dawson, Ga., about four hours from Jacksonville.

**Booking or information:** Call Al Sudderth at (229) 344-5608.

**Bow hunting:** Call Nathan Collins at (229) 886-0355.

**Additional information:** Go to [www.lizardlopelodge.com](http://www.lizardlopelodge.com)

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By [Jim Sutton](#)

SOMEWHERE SOUTH OF DAWSON, Ga. — The enemy was 600 yards out, moving laterally across a field. The moon was not to rise for another three hours. Darkness was on our side. A soft breeze was blowing from them to us, masking scent and sounds. The element of surprise tips the balance in engagements like this. We could see them. They couldn't see us.

They were out of range. Our group moved forward, covering 400 yards in a few minutes. Two held semiautomatic rifles with thermal-imaging night scopes. Two others had night-vision scopes. One was attached to a video camera, and the other was attached to my eyeballs.

We moved to within 125 yard. The riflemen got set up. By that time, another group of the enemy appeared out of nowhere, merging with the first in the darkness.

"There must be 30 of them," the guide whispered. "You guys count down together — three, two, one — then shoot."

The night erupted into muted cracks and frantic squeals. There's no mistaking a hit. It's the sound of a hand slapping a bare thigh. The misses were apparent too, the poing of the ricochet.

For a full minute it was crack, thwack, poing.

#### [VIDEO: Night hunting hogs as seen through a night vision scope](#)

White shadows folded like tacos, rolled over kicking or scattered toward the tree line. They'd run, then tumble. They glowed like ghosts and dropped like flies. And then it was over.

The riflemen were giddy. The enemy was gone. But they were still whispering.

"Man, did you see that first one go down? Yeah, how about that one circling left? That was awesome."

We loaded into the pickup and flipped on the thermal-imaging unit. Guide Nathan Collins used the joystick inside the cab to scan back and forth as we rolled across the peanut field. The heat signature of the dead hogs lit up against the background on the screen. We picked up three of the enemy and figured that at least that many made it into the trees, where their wounds had probably already turned fatal.

This was night hog hunting in Southwest Georgia. And it was a gas. Like good poker, these guided hunts are no-limit affairs. And, like the card game, wild hog hunting can be "guts" to open.

With three hogs loaded in the bed of the pickup, we headed back to Lizard Lope Lodge. The others could be gathered in the morning.

#### Growing problem

Calling hogs the enemy is not a case of journalistic license. It was Napoleon Bonaparte who surmised that an enemy travels on its stomach.



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that an army travels on its stomach.

While he probably wasn't thinking of feral hogs, his metaphor was sound. That's the trouble. It's a growing problem across the country, but particularly in Georgia and Texas, where farmers are locked in a losing battle with feral hogs. What man sows, hogs can put asunder.

### Mankind vs. hogs

Wild hogs are an invasive species in the U.S., brought to Florida by the Spanish in the 1500s. These ranged free and spread across the South. That early animal bred its way north, flirting with domestic pigs brought mainly from England. So while they are wild, they're more properly termed feral.

Hogs eat like — well, hogs. They devour any crop in the ground. They're omnivorous, eating snakes, crawfish or ground-nesting birds such as quail and turkey. They kill and eat lambs and kid goats and fawns. They thwart the management of other species such as deer and turkey by damaging feeders or rooting up feed plots.

They are bad news for both humans and native wildlife. Bacon is their highest calling.

Farmers' options are few. Traditional hunting methods aren't effective. Hogs are mainly nocturnal and lay up in deep swamps until night falls. Dogs can effectively push hogs in dense underbrush, but the dogs are often injured and sometimes killed in the process. Trapping feral hogs can be a help, but relocation only moves the problem to another area. They still need to be killed. Night-hunting gives farmers the most bang for their buck.

On Lizard Lope land during the planting season — spring through summer — two men split shifts in the truck from around 11 p.m. until dawn, driving fields and shooting hogs. That's seven days a week. What paid guest hunters take in these night hunts is gravy, a way for owners to help defray the costs of trying to keep feral hogs in check.

Hogs are among the only animals to bear young twice a year, with a 115-day gestation period. They give birth year-round. The normal litter is four to eight piglets, but there can be as many as 13. Biologists estimate that on any given piece of land, 75 percent of the hogs need harvesting each year to keep their population in balance.

### High-tech hunting

Riding the property in the pickup is an experience in itself. Driving without lights in black night on dirt roads bordered by deep water is a skill. Collins navigates by both night- and thermal-imaging vision. The thermal sensor is mounted on the top of the truck and pans 360 degrees, driven by a joystick on the dashboard. You can be driving north, with the camera panning east and have no idea where the road is.

While picking up the dead hogs that night, Collins pointed to a small shadow moving on the thermal screen at about 70 yards.

"That's a rat," he said.

The scopes and guns are another skill. These scopes are effective up to three-quarters of a mile or more. The night-vision scopes have a greenish hue. The thermal-imaging scopes will show either white on black, or vice versa, in picking up heat signatures.

The rifles are also equipped with ultra-powerful "torches" — tiny spotlights with red lenses that help illuminate the hogs out to 400 yards or more. The hunter can see that light only through a night-vision scope. The hogs can't see it at all, even though it's lighting them up like the Fourth of July.

With the introduction of night hunting, Lizard Lope Lodge becomes a crazy mix of redneck and nerd. After a hunt, owner Al Sudderth and whatever colorful cohorts he has with him that night rush to the office. Everyone heads to the computer to watch that night's videos. There's nonstop dialogue as the guys lay down a running riff for the film.

But other than that, Lizard Lope is as carefully a distilled Southern experience as the amber offerings in its seriously stocked hospitality cabinet. The 6,000 acres of farm and hunting land have been in the family for three generations.

The inside is tongue-in-groove wood, duck mounts, hog heads and deer racks you're tempted to steal.

There's a big kitchen where a chef of questionable veracity plies his trade — think Jerry Clower with an apron. He's part of the full service that Lizard Lope brags about.

In addition to the hogs, the lodge offers trophy deer hunting. The property is peppered with duck ponds where pintails, teal, ring necks, wood ducks, mallards and the occasional black duck winter.

Lizard Lope Lodge is first-class, but down-home. If you go there, you'll have new friends from low places who understand how to put on a high-brow hunt worth remembering.

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