



Creating Javelina Herds

As a herd species, javelina are dependent upon their herd for survival. Releasing a single javelina is a virtual death sentence for that animal. For this reason, Southwest Wildlife has developed a program that creates new herds, which can be released back into the wild, from the many single, orphaned, displaced, and injured javelina.

So what makes a herd? Each herd will have both a dominant male and female. The female will often be dominant over the male; she is the matriarch, the glue that holds the herd together. Javelina have very poor vision. They cannot readily see past 100 feet, and see even less in the dark (which is why they are often accused of chasing people when, in actuality, they can't see well and are just trying to get away). Because javelina can't see very well, they depend on scent and auditory communication to keep the herd together.

All javelina have a scent gland 15 cm forward from the base of their tails. Every animal in the herd will stand head to tail and rub back and forth on each other to share each others' scent. As the entire herd does this, it creates a sort of herd perfume. Each herd has its very own perfume, which is unlike any other javelina herd. They will not accept any javelina that are not wearing this perfume. If you don't smell like the herd, then you do not belong in it and will be run off or killed. This makes it very difficult to introduce new animals to a herd without causing them serious injury or death. When members of the herd have been separated, their reunion will include head to tail rubbing to renew the herd bond. In addition to rubbing on each other, they will also rub on scent posts in their territory to mark its boundaries.

A Javelina's vocalizations include: woofing (a warning to other herd members to retreat), squealing (a signal of submission, a reaction to danger, or a distress or alarm call), tooth clicking (a sign of aggression, a return threat, and important in establishing dominance), grumbling or growling (used to establish dominance, as a retreat signal, or as a return threat), low grunting (to reassemble the herd when members have been separated), complaining (this is done by young animals if they are separated from mother, ill, or distressed), and purring (to hold the herd together—a sigh of contentment audible to up to 10-15 meters).

Southwest Wildlife's herd development program creates new herds from the individual animals that come into our rehab center. Herds are created in a release pen and usually include 8 to 12 javelina. The release pen is a round chain link enclosure with multiple satellite pens adjoining it. It also has a long fenced alley which leads into a trailer, which is provided by the Arizona Department of Game & Fish.

Once individual animals are healthy enough, they are transferred into one of the smaller satellite pens. There they can safely interact with the other animals in the herd through a chain link fence. In the beginning, there is usually a lot of fighting through the fence. Over time, the fighting slowly subsides. We know we can then let the newcomer into the main release pen when we start hearing purring and they are rubbing head to tail through the fence.

There will often be a little disruption when the newcomer is actually let into the release pen. This is usually sorted out in a few minutes and has to do with where that animal will rank in the herd. Rank determines who eats first, who gets the best place to bed down, etc. Once that is sorted out, they become part of the herd.

A key component in our herd development program is the adult animals in the herd that were raised in the wild by their parents. These animals are extremely important. They teach hand-raised animals to be fearful of humans and how to survive in the wild. They teach orphans everything that their parents would have taught them: to fear predators, what to eat, what not to eat, and how to find shelter.

While in the release pen, they receive minimal contact with humans. All fencing is covered with reed screens to prevent them from seeing humans. When checking on them from behind the screen, there is no talking and such visits are limited to 3 or 4 days a week. They eat out of an automatic feeder (and are supplemented with fresh greens, mesquite beans, and cactus), drink out of an automatic waterer, and have 50-gallon tubs to bath in.

Once we have a cohesive herd, we begin to prepare them for release by feeding them in the trailer. This allows the alley and trailer to become a good place, a safe zone, and gives the trailer the herd's scent. If the trailer smells like them and they associate it with good food and safety, they will always want to go in. Therefore, they will be easy to load on release day and we will be able to move them without drugs and with minimum stress.

Prior to release, it is sometimes necessary to trim their hooves and/or put ear tags in one ear. This is always done in the release pen, not in the alley or trailer. The alley and trailer must be a safe zone where nothing bad ever happens.

On release day, Southwest Wildlife provides the Arizona Department of Game and Fish with fence panels, feed, and a water tank. The javelina are chased into the alley and the gate is closed behind them. Then they are chased into the trailer and those doors are closed. Finally, the trailer is hooked up to a truck and they are transported to the release site.

Upon arrival at the release site, the trailer is backed into the pen and unhooked from the truck. The door of the trailer is opened so they can come out whenever they are ready. Because the trailer smells like them and they are used to it, it is comforting to them. Therefore, they typically sleep in it or under it for the first several days.

After a few days, game warden Brian Anthony will open the main gate of the pen so the javelina are free to come and go as they please. They will typically remain near the trailer for several days and venture farther and farther away from the trailer and pen as days go by. This type of "slow release" gives the animals time to rest, renew their herd bond, and get used to their new surroundings.

Southwest Wildlife's herd development program has significantly improved the success and survival rates of released herds. We could not achieve these results without the continued partnership of the Arizona Department of Game & Fish.