

INTRODUCTION

Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) were once native animals of the UK, but became extinct in the 17th century. In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for wild boar meat and a consequent increase in the number of farmed wild boar.

PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS

The natural habitat of wild boar is woodland and the optimal farmed habitat, for both welfare and meat quality, replicates the boars' wild environment as far as possible. Ideally, farmed wild boar should have access to some woodland, although they can also be reared in fields. A nominal stocking rate of 6 sows / ha is usually quoted, but a lower effective stocking rate is required to allow rotational stocking and enable regeneration of woodlands and vegetation rooted over by the pigs.

Fencing – the entire perimeter must be fenced to a minimum height of 1.8m. The fence should also be buried at least 30cm below ground to try and prevent rooting out. Expect to pay in the region of £8/m for fencing. It is advisable to supplement the fixed fencing with two strands of electric fence to deter the pigs from rooting by the fixed fence. Internal fencing to assist with rotational stocking can be 1.1m, it is advisable to also use electric wires as deterrents.

Stocking rate – 6 sows / ha.

Fresh water must be constantly available.

STOCK

A herd can be started from scratch by buying in maiden gilts (females that have not bred) and a boar, in-pig sows or other sows being disposed of from another herd. Be wary when buying dispersal stock, satisfy yourself that the grounds given for dispersal are valid. Always and only buy health stock. Maiden gilts cost around £350 to £450 / head; in pig sows are closer to £600. Adult males also cost around £600.

MANAGEMENT

Mature wild boar are large (up to 1.8m in length, weighing around 200kg) and strong, care must always be taken when working with them. Wild boar are not particularly aggressive animals. However, they are timid and wary. Females will defend their young, and boars, particularly at the height of the rutting season in autumn, can be territorial.

Female wild boar are sociable animals and prefer to live in groups (sometimes known as sounders). When managing the herd, plan to run the sows in groups of six to 10 sows. The boar to sow ratio is usually one boar to a maximum of 10 sows. Outside of the rutting period, males are solitary.

Although the animals are primarily nocturnal, it is a good idea to establish a regular time during daylight at which to supply supplementary feed (see below). The boar will usually become accustomed to this and it provides the ideal opportunity to monitor them.

BREEDING

Wild boar are seasonal breeders. Increased testosterone production in the boar is triggered by decreasing day length in autumn, peaking in October / November. For the sows, the oestrus cycle is 21 days and runs from approximately September to June.

Gestation lasts 115 days, so three litters every two years are possible, but may be hard to achieve in practice.

Wild boar sows farrow without assistance. They will detach themselves from their sounder a couple of days before farrowing and, provided materials are available, they will construct a special farrowing nest (cauldron). Alternatively arcs may be provided for farrowing. Farrowing is generally trouble free.



Fig 1: Mature wild boar



Fig 2: Wild boarlets – note characteristic stripes

Litter sizes increase as sows age: first litters may only be two or three boarlets; mature sows will produce six or eight boarlets per litter.

FEEDING

In the wild, the bulk of wild boar diet comprises vegetable material, along with fruit and small animals (worms, beetles, lizards). In farmed systems, the diet should also have a significant vegetable content either from rooting and foraging in the woodland, or, if this is not adequate, through bought in vegetable feed (NB feeding of catering waste was made illegal after the 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease). To ensure appropriate nutrition and productivity supplementary cereal-based pig rations should be provided: allow up to 3kg per sow per day.

Boarlets are weaned at eight to 14 weeks on to a diet of *ad lib* vegetable material supplemented with a concentrate grower ration (rising to around 1kg per head per day at finishing).

Boar are usually slaughtered at around 80kg – 90kg liveweight which equates to approximately nine to 12 months of age. Carcass weight will be around 50kg – 55kg (around 60% killing out).

HEALTH

Wild boar are generally robust and do not routinely suffer from ill health. However, they are susceptible to, and / or can be carriers of, the same diseases which affect domestic pigs. There are also populations of feral pigs and feral wild boar which could potentially infect stock. This is another reason to ensure that the compound has a secure perimeter fence. Where possible, it is preferable to run a closed herd. If new stock are brought in, the usual precautionary measures of isolation and observation prior to integration with the herd should be observed.

LEGISLATION

The legislation governing the management of animals is strict and complex. The following only provide basic guidance and comprehensive information and advice should always be sought from your Divisional Animal Health Office, Local Authority or other competent authority. The legislation applicable to pigs pertains to wild boar.

Wild boar are classified as dangerous animals under the terms of the **Dangerous Wild Animals Act** (1979; 1984), a licence must be obtained from the local authority. Failure to do so is a criminal offence. The licence must be renewed annually.

Registration of holding – all holdings with pigs need to be registered with Defra through your local Animal Health Office. If you do not already have a County Parish Holding number (CPH) you must apply for one before bringing pigs onto the property.

Movement of boar requires a licence, and once a new animal has been brought onto the farm, all pigs there are subject to a 20 days standstill.

Identification – pigs over 12 months of age need to be permanently marked; pigs less than 12 months can be transferred between holdings on a temporary mark. Pigs going to slaughter need to be ear tagged.

REVENUES

Figures quoted for margins achievable through producing wild boar vary widely. Much will depend on initial set up costs (particularly fencing) and the markets which the produce will be sold into. Between £400 and £500 per sow per year should be realistic. Achieving three litters every two years could increase margins by 50%. On-farm processing (joints, stew packs, sausages, etc.) and / or selling directly to high quality catering outlets can add substantial value.

Wild boar meat is promoted as a healthy meat. It is high in protein and minerals, and low in fat and cholesterol. It has a distinctive gamey flavour.

CROSS BREEDING

Wild boar and domesticated pigs can interbreed. Farming of these hybrids is another enterprise which is increasing. However producers must be aware that it is an offence under the Trade Descriptions Act to market meat from cross-bred pigs as wild boar. The meat from cross-bred pigs lacks the distinctive flavour of wild boar meat.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The British Wild Boar website (www.britishwildboar.org.uk) hosts a forum page where stock for sale and wanted can be advertised. It also has a wealth of information about wild boar in general.