

Pigs: are they smarter than dogs?

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By Karina Kumar

The pigs emerge from every nook and cranny, all 40 of them, snorting, squealing, squeaking.

Most of the pigs were sleeping in their shelters, hiding from the cold. But, the sound of food hitting the dining table quickly perked their fuzzy ears and caused them to stampede.

It's lunch time at the Central Texas Pig Rescue.

Most of the pigs at the rescue are from cruelty seizures or pets that were given up. This sanctuary for last-chance pigs currently has 204 pigs, four donkeys, two cats and some chickens. It was founded in 2016 to provide a place for pigs to live out their best lives in better conditions. The rescue has now become a resource for pig adoptions and student research opportunities.

In October 2021, the Central Texas Pig Rescue moved locations to a piece of land more suited for their needs, director Tracey Stabile said.

"We just were looking for a home that was going to be more in line with the conditions that would bring [the pigs] the most joy and really inspire their own natural inclinations," she said.

Despite the new land, the rescue can't take in as many pigs as they want to. And to prevent owners from dropping off animals on their doorstep, the address of the rescue is kept private – except for those who volunteer.

"I would love to say that we can just take in every single animal that needs a home," Stabile said. "But we just can't do that. We don't have the resources for it."

In general, Stabile said "There's too many pigs in the world and not enough places for those pigs to go."

Dr. Dusty Nagy, a veterinarian at Texas A&M University, said most of the rescue pigs she treats are ones that owners gave up.

"Pigs are incredibly smart," Nagy said. "So they're often given up for behavioral reasons. They're smarter than dogs. And if you don't raise them well and mannerly they will run amok."

The Central Texas Pig Rescue works with the Large Animal Hospital at Texas A&M for its veterinary care.

Nagy, who is a clinical associate professor of food animal medicine and surgery, said she mostly treats pigs for ear infections, lameness and arthritis.

“These guys have a fairly sizable body on little tiny legs,” she said. “And often little tiny crooked legs.”

While the animal hospital deals with many different kinds of large animals, Nagy said she sees at least one pig a week.

“Some weeks, I feel like we are a pig haven,” Nagy said.

With more pigs than there are spaces at rescues, Eastern Snouts does what it can to find homes with adopters for pigs.

The Facebook group is based on the East Coast, but co-founder, Anna Kulczycki said they will help in emergency situations all over the country. They help find homes for eight to 10 pigs a week.

“We really strive to make it known that we're here for the pig community,” Kulczycki said. “So we're trying as much as we can.”

She said having a pig is like having a bratty toddler for 20 years. They have a lot of personality and want a lot of affection, which sometimes makes it hard for people to handle them, she said.

Kulczycki became a part of the community when she got her first pig.

“I really just fell in love with them,” she said. “To a degree that I didn't know could be possible, because I love all animals, but especially, especially my pigs.”

Susan Armstrong-Magidson, founder of the Pig Placement Network, feels the same.

“They just give me everything,” Armstrong-Magidson said. “It's too profound to really have words for. It's a passion. It's a calling.”

Armstrong-Magidson started the Pig Placement Network in 1998 when she was taking care of more pigs than she could find homes for. The organization uses its website to connect people giving up pigs with adopters – similar to Kulczycki's Facebook group.

Rescues can link their sites to the network to help find homes for their own pigs or for people who reach out to them wanting to give up their pigs.

Armstrong-Magidson also does consultations and educational seminars to help people learn about taking care of their pet pigs.

"You can Google it and hear anything you want to hear about pet pigs," she said. "But it isn't always the best advice and can cause problems."

Armstrong-Magidson said some of the people who meet with her for a consultation because their pig is misbehaving, end up keeping their pig.

"They're just my favorite animal," Armstrong-Magidson said. "But then I talk to little 5-year-old girls quite often, and it's their favorite animal, too."

In Austin, the pigs at the Central Texas Pig Rescue have started giving back to the humans by just being themselves. Researchers at the University of Texas have begun a study of behavior and personalities by regular observations of the pigs.

Noah Stetson and Abby Jones, who are both members of the Ecology, Evolution and Behavior Club at UT, are part of the first research team studying if pigs have personalities.

Unlike some of the pig advocates, Jones, a biology sophomore and the undergraduate research assistant, remains skeptical.

"The only people that probably believe they have personalities are the radical vegans," Jones said.

But, as she observed the behaviors of the pigs, they did seem to show that they had differing moods and temperaments.

Wilbur, the town bully, charged at Jones every time he saw her. She observed him during feeding time as he caused fights and shoved other pigs around.

Dora was the friendliest pig. Jones said Dora decided she was "her best friend" and followed her around to the point of disrupting the observations.

"It was cute realizing that they did kind of get to know us the way that people's dogs or cats would," Jones said.

Stetson, a psychology major and the lead researcher, has yet to find a specific correlation between behaviors and perceived personalities. But, he thinks this kind of research is still vital.

"Looking at animal personality can allow us to kind of compare and contrast to humans," he said. "You can go to Costco and watch people and try to figure out their personality but with pigs, you can really see them in their more natural environment."

Jones said this research is also important because pigs are so understudied.

“There's just certain things that get ignored and haven't been studied because they're not seen as important,” she said. “But I think the more we know about all different kinds of animal cognition, the more we can just understand cognition in general.”

One of the requirements for Stetson's research was that it didn't disturb the pigs' everyday activities.

Meeting the requirement wasn't hard as most of the pigs couldn't be bothered.

They scrambled in the mud for just another bite, rolling around in the muck. An excruciating stench started to fill the air. The concept of smelling like a pig undersells the nostril-burning sensation.

A day with the pigs is never a boar.