

New World Screwworms in Texas: A Hidden Threat to Wildlife

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New World Screwworms in Texas: Wildlife in Focus

New World Screwworms in Texas present a serious yet often overlooked threat to native wildlife. These flesh-eating parasites, once eradicated from the United States, have the potential to devastate both livestock and wild animal populations if reintroduced. As wildlife and environmental changes increase the risk of infestation, it's essential to understand how screwworms impact Texas ecosystems, what species are at risk, and what measures are in place to prevent an outbreak.

What Are New World Screwworms?

New World Screwworms are the larvae (maggots) of the *Cochliomyia hominivorax* fly, also known as the New World screwworm fly. Unlike most maggots that feed on dead tissue, screwworms consume living flesh. Female flies lay their eggs in open wounds or natural body openings of warm-blooded animals. Once hatched, the larvae burrow into the tissue, causing severe damage, infections, and, if untreated, death.

Historically, New World Screwworms were a major problem across the southern United States, including Texas. They affected livestock, pets, and wildlife alike. Fortunately, an aggressive eradication program led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) eliminated screwworms in the U.S. by the early 1980s. However, cases of screwworms in Texas have reappeared periodically, raising concerns among wildlife managers and veterinarians.

New World Screwworms in Texas: A Risk to Native Wildlife

The presence of [screwworms in Texas](#) is not just a threat to livestock—native wildlife species are also highly susceptible. Animals like white-tailed deer, javelinas, coyotes, and

even endangered species such as the Texas ocelot or Kemp's ridley sea turtles are at risk. Because these animals often inhabit remote areas, early detection of screwworm infestation is challenging, making the impact on wildlife potentially catastrophic.

1. White-Tailed Deer

White-tailed deer are one of the most abundant and economically important wildlife species in Texas. They are also a prime target for screwworm infestation. During the rutting season, bucks often sustain injuries from fights, providing the perfect breeding ground for screwworm flies. An infested wound can quickly lead to significant tissue damage, rendering the animal weak or killing it outright. The loss of even a small percentage of the population can have ripple effects on ecosystems and local hunting economies.

2. Endangered and Rare Species

Screwworms in Texas also threaten several endangered species. For example, the tiny population of ocelots in South Texas—numbering fewer than 100 individuals—could be devastated by a single outbreak. Because these cats live in dense brush and are rarely observed, a screwworm infestation could go undetected until multiple animals have perished. Similarly, screwworm larvae have been found in the wounds of nesting Kemp's ridley sea turtles in recent years, raising alarm among conservationists.

Ecological Impacts of New World Screwworm Outbreaks

The ecological effects of screwworms in Texas are broad and complex. These parasites can reduce the populations of key species, disrupt predator-prey relationships, and even alter the structure of entire ecosystems. For example, if deer populations decline sharply due to screwworm infestations, predators like coyotes or bobcats may shift to alternative prey, creating imbalances that affect small mammal and bird populations.

Furthermore, the carcasses of infested animals may attract scavengers and spread secondary infections, compounding the ecological disturbance. In fragile habitats, particularly in South Texas and along the Gulf Coast, even localized screwworm outbreaks can set back years of conservation work.

Economic Implications for Texas

While wildlife is the primary concern in this context, the economic consequences of screwworms in Texas cannot be ignored. Texas has one of the largest wildlife-based recreation industries in the nation. Hunting leases, wildlife watching, and eco-tourism bring in billions of dollars annually. A large-scale screwworm outbreak affecting game animals like deer or exotics could lead to decreased hunting success, fewer bookings, and lost revenue for rural communities.

Moreover, managing a screwworm outbreak is costly. The USDA and Texas Animal Health Commission must deploy surveillance, trapping, and sterile fly release programs to contain the spread—initiatives that require significant funding and coordination. If screwworms become established again, both the agricultural and wildlife sectors could face long-term consequences.

History of New World Screwworm Eradication in Texas

Texas played a pivotal role in the national effort to eradicate [screwworms](#) in the 20th century. The groundbreaking sterile insect technique (SIT), where millions of sterile male flies were released to interrupt the breeding cycle, proved to be highly effective. By 1982, the U.S. declared screwworms eradicated.

However, sporadic cases have surfaced since then, usually stemming from imported animals or wildlife migrating from Latin America. In 2016, a significant screwworm outbreak occurred in the Florida Keys, killing dozens of endangered Key deer and triggering a national emergency response. This incident served as a stark reminder of the parasite's destructive potential—and the importance of continued vigilance, particularly in states like Texas that share a long border with Mexico, where screwworms are still endemic.

Prevention and Monitoring Efforts

To protect Texas wildlife from screwworms, multiple prevention strategies are in place:

- **Surveillance and Reporting:** Wildlife biologists and veterinarians are trained to recognize screwworm symptoms and report suspicious cases quickly. The public is also encouraged to report animals with abnormal wounds.

- **Border Inspection:** The USDA and Texas Animal Health Commission monitor livestock and pets crossing the southern border to prevent infested animals from entering the state.
- **Sterile Fly Release Program:** A cooperative program with Mexico uses sterile fly releases along the border to keep screwworm populations suppressed and prevent reintroduction.
- **Education and Outreach:** Landowners, hunters, and wildlife managers receive information on how to identify and respond to screwworm outbreaks, helping increase early detection rates.

What You Can Do

If you're a landowner, hunter, or nature enthusiast in Texas, you can help prevent the return of screwworms in Texas:

- Inspect wildlife and pets for unusual wounds that worsen over time.
- Report any suspected cases to the Texas Animal Health Commission or USDA.
- Avoid transporting animals from screwworm-endemic regions without proper inspection.
- Support conservation organizations working to protect vulnerable wildlife species.

Conclusion

New World Screwworms in Texas may seem like a problem of the past, but their potential to impact wildlife today is very real. From white-tailed deer to endangered ocelots, the state's diverse wildlife faces significant threats if this parasite reestablishes itself. Continued monitoring, education, and swift response are essential to protecting Texas's ecosystems and the animals that call them home.

By staying informed and vigilant, we can help ensure that New World Screwworms in Texas remain a story of successful eradication—not a modern conservation crisis.