

## Boar plague strikes fear into France

Paul Webster

**A**NDRE DUMAZET, a retired Parisian shopkeeper, who spotted five wild boars lazing in his swimming pool at Saint-Tropez as if they were amiable holidaymakers found nothing funny in the scene.

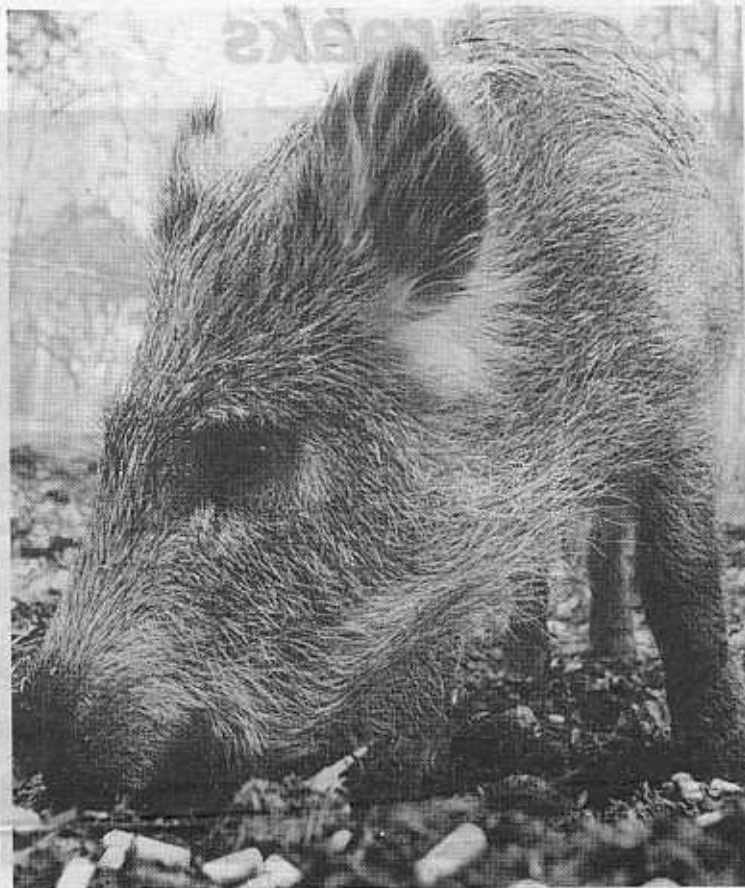
To him the pigs were the advance guard of a large and menacing army. There has been a remarkable proliferation of the animals, which reportedly hunt in herds, disembowel sheep, knock over rambles and cause traffic accidents.

This year there were an estimated 700,000 boars on the loose, nearly nine times more than roamed 25 years ago, despite a record cull in 1997 of more than 320,000 beasts. Half of the herds live among the scrubby *garrigue* of the Mediterranean coastline, where they are blamed for devastating crops and golf greens. The growth in numbers has also been damaging in northern France, forcing officials to open the hunting season in August, two months early, in the hope of keeping them in check.

What would be a feast for Asterix's pal Obelix — boar's meat fetches about \$8 a kilo — has become a terrifying threat for shepherds in the Jean Giono country behind the Mediterranean coastline.

Claude Mabille, who has a sheep farm among the bare hills of Haute-Provence, has created an association called Stop-Ravages with 200 other isolated farmers.

"Part of the growth can be blamed on the rural exodus and the sharp drop in the number of hunters. Forests were deliberately



Growing herds of wild pigs are being blamed for attacks on sheep

restocked with game to meet hunters' demands, but now they just can't cope."

Flocks of sheep are now guarded at night in the Aude *département* after attacks in which 22 ewes and 13 lambs were killed on one farm alone in the past four months. Mireille Ouradou, a local veterinary surgeon, has been collecting post-mortem evidence that the wild pigs were responsible.

"The injuries show that the sheep were attacked from behind," she said. "Their tails had been pulled off and their stomachs ripped out.

Dogs would have attacked the sheep's throats."

But Jacques Vassant, of the Office National de la Chasse, was doubtful that the pigs would gore sheep. "Boars are opportunists, and if they can't get enough of their staple diet, such as acorns, they'll eat anything from grass to vines," he said. "They'll even dig up worms and scavenge in dustbins, but they are not carrion eaters. The dangers are exaggerated, and wiping them out would not be justified. Too many people are crying wolf, if you see what I mean."