

Mourning Dove Management in Alabama

The mourning dove is probably the most popular game bird in North America. Hunters harvest more than 50 million doves annually from a continental population estimated at over 500 million. Each year, more than 100,000 Alabama hunters take between 2½ to 3½ million doves.

Dove hunting generates millions of dollars of revenue annually. Many landowners in Alabama, particularly farmers, use dove hunting as an additional source of income through commercial, pay-to-shoot dove fields. Dove hunting also generates dollars for wildlife management and research through excise taxes placed on the sale of firearms and ammunition.

No other game bird matches the mourning dove's widespread distribution. Populations of mourning doves occur from southern Canada all the way into Central America, and they occupy almost all portions of the United States.

Life History

Northern populations of mourning doves must move south every winter to avoid harsh weather and to find food. Doves usually leave northern portions of their range by October and return during early spring. Migratory movements of 150 to 200 miles per day are common.

Although some doves remain in Alabama throughout the year (resident breeding population), a much larger concentration winters here. Cold weather in Alabama may push doves toward the Gulf Coast. From there, they move west along the coastline, often traveling into Central America.

Even daily movements of non-migrating mourning doves may be extensive. Doves have flown as far as 12 miles (one way) to reach feeding fields. Flights of 2 to 3 miles from roosts to feeding areas are common.

In Alabama, doves begin pairing and nesting by February. Once paired, doves remain faithful to a single mate (monogamous) for at least one entire breeding season. The nesting season extends from mid-February to October in most of Alabama, but nesting may occur during all months of the year in extreme southern counties of the state.

Nests are typically located about 15 feet above the ground in trees or tall shrubs. Ground-level nests are extremely rare. Typically, two eggs are laid in each nest. Rarely will nests contain three or four eggs. Incubation of eggs begins immediately after the first

egg is laid and continues for 14 days after the last egg is laid.

The young, known as squabs, are unable to feed themselves and must be kept warm (brooded) continuously until they are 10 days old. The female feeds them *pigeon milk* for the first nine days after hatching. Pigeon milk is a substance produced in the female dove's crop (seed storage pocket of the throat).

After these first nine days, the female begins preparing for the next set of eggs and young doves. At this time, the male assumes sole responsibility for feeding the young until they are about three weeks old. By 15 days of age, the young are fed only seeds. At this time, they leave the nest or *fledge* but continue to be fed by the male. The fledglings are completely independent by 20 days of age.

With this *assembly line* production of young, mourning doves are capable of raising six to seven broods during a single breeding season. In addition, young fledged during the spring become reproductively mature at 90 to 100 days old and may reproduce during that same year. This tremendous reproductive potential allows mourning doves to overcome a 70-percent annual loss. This is why the mourning dove season lasts so long.

Habitat Preferences

Mourning doves eat seeds and plants almost exclusively. But they also eat small traces of animal matter—primarily insects. Seeds of agricultural grain crops, native grasses, and weeds are used heavily.

Doves are poor scratchers and will not scratch for seeds buried under crop residue. Only rarely will they perch on seed heads to feed. Therefore, seeds must be available on relatively clean, open ground. The birds need small particles of gravel or grit to grind their food and to digest hard-coated seeds. Sufficient amounts of grit are usually ingested incidentally while doves are feeding in agricultural fields.

Doves also need free sources of drinking water—almost daily. Mostly, doves use puddles, ponds, and streams with clear edges.

Mourning doves usually build nests in flat-angled branches of trees or shrubs. Nests are usually located in areas with scattered trees or in small stands of trees. Doves nests are seldom found within dense woodlands.

Nest sites must offer good protection from bad weather and from nest predators. Late winter nests are almost always built in conifers, such as pines and cedars, because they are hidden from view.

Managing Dove Fields

The objective of mourning dove management is usually to attract large numbers of birds to shooting areas during the hunting season. This can be done by ensuring that some mature grain is available to doves at all times of the year. Fields may be planted specifically for doves, or commercial agricultural fields may be managed to attract them.

SIZE OF FIELDS. Dove fields should be at least 2 acres in size. The number of hunters anticipated should dictate the upper limits of field size. Depending upon the shape of the field, 1 acre is usually needed for each hunter.

Shooting opportunities may be extended by leaving small portions of large fields unharvested and by harvesting or mowing those portions periodically during the fall.

Again, because doves have short legs and cannot walk in deep litter, seeds must be available on top of bare soil surfaces. If crop residue or litter is heavy, you may have to rake to expose food.

More food may be made available to doves by burning parts of fields where residue is heavy and moisture conditions are low.

Agricultural fields in which wheat is broadcast for planting and left uncovered often provide excellent dove hunting opportunities. They not only provide grain during early periods of the hunting season, but they also yield seed for doves the following summer.

PLANTING DOVE FIELDS. Plant fields in browntop millet, dove proso millet, grain sorghum, corn, sesame, or sunflowers. Planting portions of large fields in different grains and varying the planting dates will help attract doves early and hold them throughout much of the hunting season. Contact your county Extension agent for help in selecting varieties that are suited to your area, planting dates, maturation periods, and planting methods.

Plant at least one early maturing grain, such as browntop millet, as soon as the danger of frost is past to provide seed during summer for fledglings and nesting adults. Later plantings may be made to ensure that there is plenty of seed during the hunting season.

Mowing portions of wheat fields that were planted the previous year may also provide seed during the summer. After wheat fields mature, mow strips periodically through the summer to make grain available to doves.

Crop residue must be light and seeds must be exposed on relatively bare ground. Allow mowed fields to dry. Then, rake the residue into windrows or burn it. Weed control is usually necessary.

ATTRACTING DOVES TO COMMERCIAL FIELDS. Doves are frequently attracted to commercial agricultural fields planted in corn, soybeans, and peanuts. If dove hunting is planned, harvest such fields at least two weeks before planned hunts. This will allow doves enough time to locate available food before shooting.

Caution: Dove field management must follow *normal* agricultural practices. Consult conservation law enforcement officers in your area regarding the legal aspects and limitations of planting and harvesting crops for doves.

Managing Hunts

Sufficient numbers of hunters are needed to keep doves flying and to prevent them from landing in fields during shooting. However, to ensure hunter safety, never exceed one hunter per acre or one hunter per 100 yards of linear field edge.

Frequent shooting over fields often discourages doves from feeding in those fields. In most cases, individual fields should not be hunted more than once a week.

Restrict hunting to morning hours, where legal, and early afternoon. Avoid shooting during the last couple of hours before sunset. By allowing doves to feed undisturbed late each afternoon, shooting opportunities may be extended over the entire season.



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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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