

MANAGEMENT AND HUNTING OF MOURNING DOVES IN ALABAMA



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The mourning dove is the most numerous, widespread, and hunted game bird of North America. Alabama is fortunate to have an abundance of both resident and migratory mourning doves annually. More than 70,000 Alabama hunters harvested in excess of a million doves during the hunting season. With a little extra effort, you can manage your farm to attract more doves for some exciting wing shooting.

Life History

Mourning dove populations occur from southern Canada to northern Mexico. Millions of mourning doves migrate south every winter to avoid harsh weather and to find food. They usually leave their northern range and travel south from September through February and return to their breeding grounds from March through August.

Alabama has a large resident population of mourning doves, which is generously supplemented by northern migrants that over winter here. Most of our migrant mourning doves come from the north central states and to a lesser degree from the

northeastern states. However, research has shown that over 80% of the doves harvested in Alabama are resident birds.

In Alabama, the breeding season usually peaks in late spring and early summer. Nests are usually about 15 feet from the ground and are often along field and pasture edges or adjacent to other open areas. Two eggs are laid in the nest and incubation begins immediately after both eggs are laid. Eggs hatch in 14 days and the young are fed pigeon milk (a milky substance produced in the dove's crop) and partially digested seeds by both parents until they are ready to leave the nest. The young doves, or squabs, develop rapidly and can fly at around 12 days old. Soon after the young leave the nest the adults begin preparation for a second brood, often using the same nest. In Alabama, three to seven broods may be produced each year. The life span of wild mourning doves may exceed 5 years but the annual natural mortality in the continental population is 70% whether hunted or not.

Habitat Preferences

Mourning doves primarily feed on various seeds including waste grain, native and cultivated grasses and occasionally feed on small traces of insect matter. Large open cultivated fields of millet, sunflower, corn, wheat, soybeans and peanuts often attract large numbers of birds. Carolina cranesbill, dove weed (woolly croton), morning glory, pokeberry, ragweed, spiny pigweed, bristle grass are some native foods doves highly prefer. Doves rarely scratch the ground for food and seeds must be on open ground where they can easily be seen. Mourning doves will often sit on power lines, trees, or snags prior to flying down in to a field.

Mourning doves must have grit (sand and gravel) in their gizzard to help grind food. Often doves are seen in dirt roads or along the edge of paved roads picking up grit. Doves also require water daily and prefer to get water from ponds, streams and puddles that have clear banks and edges with a gentle slope to the water.

Managing Dove Fields

Mourning doves may be attracted to fields for hunting by ensuring some mature grain is available for them. It is important to pay close attention to planting dates and seed maturation dates to ensure the grain crop will be available during the dove hunting season. Dove fields may be varied in shape, but should be at least two acres. Larger fields of 20-60 acres are recommended for both safety and to allow you to adequately spot the doves to prepare for the shot. A good rule of thumb is to allow one acre for each gun on the field.

Browntop millet, dove proso millet and peredovik sunflower are highly preferred foods used to attract doves. Often times these seed varieties will be mature before corn is ready for harvest. Browntop should be planted on a well prepared seedbed, in rows 36 inches apart at the rate of 10 to 12 pounds per acre drilled, or 25 pounds per acre broadcasted. Fertilize and lime at the recommended rate determined by your soil test. Browntop seed matures in 70 days and should be planted from mid May-July. Dove proso may be planted using the same method as browntop and will mature in 90 days. Mowing and raking or burning the millet once the seed is mature is recommended to better expose the seeds for the doves. Perdovik sunflower should be planted on a well prepared seedbed, in an alternating two-row pattern 48 inches apart at the rate of 8

pounds per acre drilled. Planting two rows and skipping two rows will provide more bare ground for doves while feeding. Unwanted grasses and weeds between the rows should be controlled by disking. Sunflowers mature in 90 to 100 days.

Cornfields harvested late will often attract late fall and winter doves. To provide additional preferred fall and winter food sources plant milo, grain sorghum and peanuts. To hold doves for the entire season, browntop and milo may be planted in alternating strips in cornfields of about 8 rows each. Wheat fields of 1-3 acres, planted in the fall and left unharvested, will provide doves food during the summer months. Planting combinations will increase the probability that some seeds will be available and mature during dove hunting season. It will also reduce the risk of losing a crop to insects, disease or adverse weather. Importantly, plan some crop planting to mature 1-2 weeks prior to shooting, to allow doves to find the field. Ultimately a dove manager's goal should be to provide a continuous supply of diverse and highly preferred foods throughout the year.

In order to ensure a successful hunt it is important to have enough hunters on the field to keep doves flying rather than landing in the field. A good rule of thumb is to hunt individual fields once a week. Shooting over fields too regularly will discourage doves from feeding and they may go elsewhere in search of food. To extend hunting over the entire season, restrict hunting hours. Allowing doves time to feed in the early morning and late afternoon hours will help keep them coming back to the field.

Legal Issues

Mourning doves and other migratory birds are a national resource protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Federal and state game laws and regulations help ensure that these birds continue to thrive while providing hunting opportunities.

One of the most common problems associated with dove hunting is hunting over bait. This is usually caused by a basic lack of understanding of what constitutes baiting. According to federal and state law, no person shall take or attempt to take migratory game birds by the aid of baiting or on or over any baited area. Baiting is placing, exposing, depositing or scattering salt, corn, wheat or other grain, or any feed that may lure or attract doves to or over an area where hunters are attempting to harvest them. Any area where bait has been placed constitutes a baited area. A baited area is considered baited for 10 days following the complete removal of the bait. Often times doves will habitually return to a feeding area for a few days after the bait has been removed.

Doves may be hunted over a standing crop or any field where any grain, feed or salt has been distributed or scattered as a result of a normal agricultural operation. This includes lands planted as wildlife food plots, providing that the seed is planted in a manner consistent with the recommendations for planting. Standing crops may also be manipulated by any method to attract doves such as mowing, disking or burning so long as it is not harvested and then redistributed on the field. The practice known as "hogging down," occurs when livestock are allowed to enter a field and feed on standing or harvested crops. Usually this practice involves peanuts or corn and it provides a legal field for harvesting doves.

Normal Agricultural Planting and Hunting of Dove Regulation

As required by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources recognizes the Alabama Cooperative Extension System as the authority on what is considered a bona fide or normal agricultural operation. Your local county extension office has free publications explaining proper farming practices and techniques.

Recently the Alabama Cooperative Extension System determined that top sowing of wheat is a normal agricultural practice for establishing a cover crop in low-input management systems. Regulation 220-2-.114, entitled "Normal Agricultural Planting and Hunting of Dove" was recently amended to read as follows:

1. Top sowing of wheat is a recommended planting practice for establishing a cover crop in low-input management systems. This planting practice requires a well prepared seedbed. A well prepared seedbed involves adequate tilling of the soil so that when the seeds are planted there will be good soil-to-seed contact and the soil is not excessively hard (i.e. it can easily be penetrated by the developing root of the germinating small grain seed). Growers should be aware that the risk of establishing a stand associated with this planting practice is higher than with drilling or other methods that result in coverage of seed.

Recommended practices of planting small grain without a prepared seedbed are: (1) no till drilling; (2) broadcasting small grains into the cotton stubble that remains after harvest followed by mowing the cotton stubble; and (3) aerial seeding small grains into standing crops such as cotton or soybeans prior to defoliation or leaf drop.

2. It is recommended that small grain other than as outlined above be planted in a prepared seedbed by broadcasting or drilling and a bona fide attempt be made to cover seed by cultipacking, disking, raking, etc. Some incidental seed may remain on the surface following a bona fide covering attempt. All small grain planting should adhere to planting dates recommended in printed tables furnished by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. Recommended seeding rate for small grain is no more than 200 lbs./acre. Seeds should be uniformly distributed.

The earliest recommended planting dates for wheat in the North, Central, and South planting zones are North zone – August 25; Central zone – September 1; South zone – September 15. Refer to the map contained within this brochure for planting zone locations.

It will be illegal to hunt over wheat planted before these dates or outside of dates recommended in printed tables furnished by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. Any small grain planting that does not conform to these guidelines shall be considered bait. Multiple seedings are not permitted.

A responsible hunter will always ask the landowner or his agent if the field is baited prior to the hunt. Take a quick walk around the field and check for the presence of grain, feed, salt or any material that is not part of a normal agricultural operation. Make sure the grain on the field was grown there and that it is evenly distributed throughout

the field. If it is a freshly plowed field, ask when the soil was turned and what was planted. If the hunter has any doubt, it is probably best to leave the field.

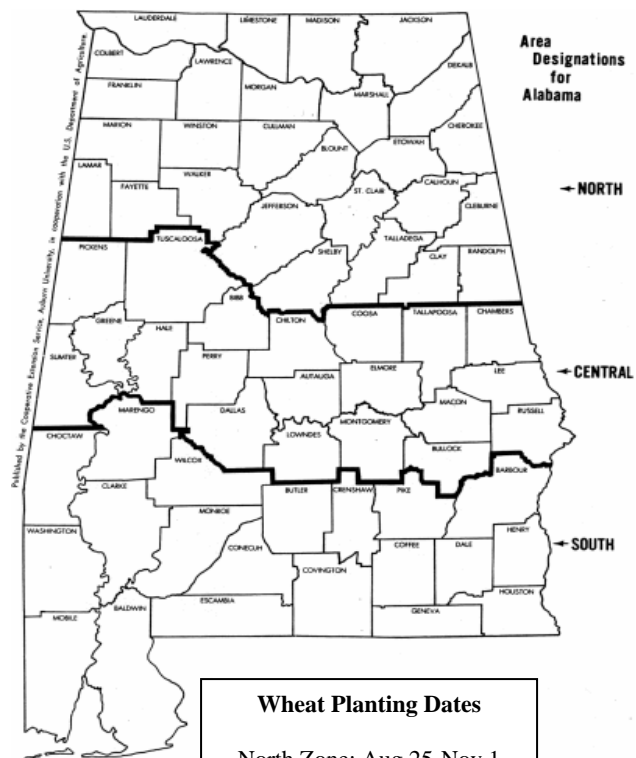
Harvest Information Program (HIP) Permit Required to Hunt Doves

Since 1996, a Harvest Information Program (HIP) Permit has been required to hunt doves in Alabama. The permit is free and can be obtained from sporting license agents in the state. This federal program's objective is to obtain migratory game bird harvest information from hunters. Information gained from this survey is used in managing dove and other migratory game bird populations. Hunters must complete a brief survey about past hunting success. After completing the survey, hunters are given a permit that sticks to the back of their hunting license. Anyone (ages 16-65) hunting doves in Alabama must have a valid state hunting license and HIP permit in their possession. Persons exempt from the license requirement are not required to obtain the HIP Permit.

Exotics

The Eurasian Collared Dove, Ring-necked Dove, and Pigeons may be harvested and do not count as part of your bag limit. It is illegal to harvest the Common Ground Dove because it is a protected species.

Area Zone Designations for Alabama



Wheat Planting Dates

North Zone: Aug 25-Nov 1
 Central Zone: Sept 1-Nov 15
 South Zone: Sept 15-Dec 1



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