

The Mourning Dove

by Dick Gregory



The mourning dove, *Zenaidura macroura*, is one of the most abundant and popular game birds in the U.S. It is hunted in over 30 states, and is the source of enjoyment, nationwide, for countless birders. In states where it is not hunted, the mourning dove is protected as a songbird.

Description and Distribution

The mourning dove is usually 11 to 13 inches in length, a little larger than a robin. Its head feathers are light-brown with buffy-gray body feathers, and wing feathers that have a slight bluish cast. The tail feathers are long and white tipped, which is very conspicuous when the tail is spread. There is a small black spot on each side of its head.

The mourning dove (turtle dove as some old-timers often refer to it) has a mournful “ooah-coo-coo-coo” call, from which it gets its common name. It flies in a dipping, darting fashion with a whistling sound caused by its rapid wing beat.

Nesting records show that the mourning dove nests in every U.S. to as far south as Panama. Many doves remain in Arkansas year-round. The largest concentrations of migrating doves usually begin to arrive in late August.

Habitat

Mourning doves will live and nest in dry regions but prefer areas close to water. Doves are very adaptable and many times find themselves quite at home near man. They are often seen in open woodlots, along roadsides, in suburban backyards, pasturelands and vast agricultural fields. If not nesting near water, doves fly long distances to drink and bathe in it, both morning and evening. Wheat seems to be their preferred grain food, though they are known to eat corn, peas, soybeans and enormous quantities of weed seeds. Milo was a preferred food but new bird resistant strains have cut back on its use as a food.

The birds often sit on roadsides, gravel bars and sand bars where they take dust baths and pick up small bits of rock and grit. This is known as graveling, and they take the grit into their gizzards using it to help grind the seeds.

Reproduction

Mourning doves have strong pair bonds. Mated pairs can be seen together year-round. They nest in trees and shrubs and rarely on the ground. The nest is a flimsy platform of sticks on which the

female lays two glossy, white eggs. The male helps with incubation and feeding the young. The eggs hatch in approximately 14 days and in another 14 days, the fledglings leave the nest. As many as six clutches may be produced each year by the same pair in some areas of the south.

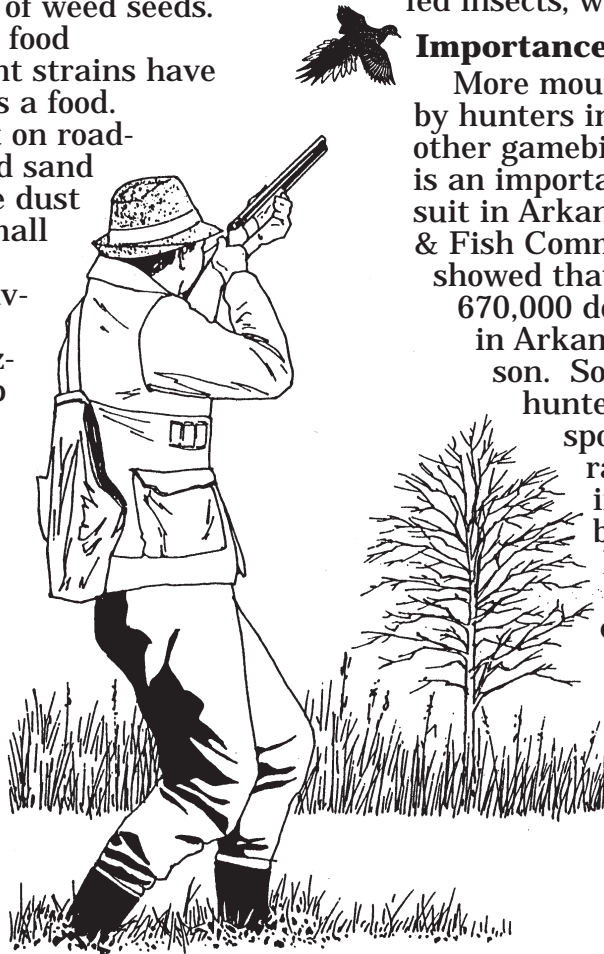
The young doves are fed "pigeon milk," a milk-like substance that is pre-digested food formed in the crop of the adult bird. This supply of pigeon milk lasts only about nine days after the eggs hatch. After that, the young are fed insects, worms and seeds.

Importance

More mourning doves are taken by hunters in the U.S. than any other gamebird, and dove hunting is an important recreational pursuit in Arkansas. A 1984-85 Game & Fish Commission hunter survey showed that some 450,000-

670,000 doves were harvested in Arkansas during that season. Some 33,500 Arkansas hunters participate in the sport, making it comparable to quail hunting in popularity and just behind waterfowl hunting.

Most hunters don't care to admit how many shells it takes them to bag a dove, proving it's a challenging sport. The most active times for shooting are early morning and



late afternoon. These are peak feeding and watering periods for doves. Doves spend the better part of the middle of the day resting.

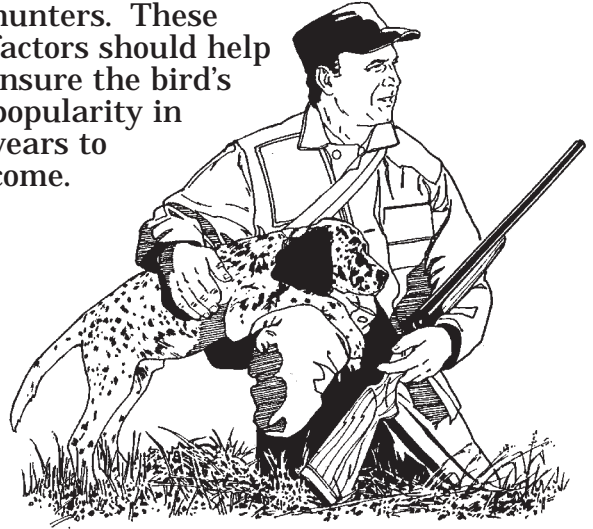
Doves are also important aesthetically to bird watchers, and their voracious consumption of weed seeds helps control some noxious plants.

Management

The dove is one game bird that doesn't require much habitat management because of its relative adaptability. Most current agricultural land use practices in the state will continue to attract and hold mourning doves. The dove will continue to thrive as long as there are grain fields, timber

cutovers, water sources and areas for them to gravel. The mourning dove is a migratory bird and therefore the hunting season framework is controlled by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in states that allow hunting.

The mourning dove is a very abundant, versatile bird enjoyed by many, from bird watchers to hunters. These factors should help insure the bird's popularity in years to come.



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