

A Fast, Fun Shoot

Mourning doves hang around Montana for only a short time each September. Here's how to take advantage of that brief bird-hunting window.

By Jack Ballard

DOVE BLIND A hunter hides between silos as mourning doves cross an eastern Montana wheat field on their way to a watering hole.

The haunting *who-OOO-ooo-ooo-ooo* melody of a male mourning dove may sound sorrowful to the human ear. But the song is actually a mating call, a harbinger of life, not loss. A better rendering of the comely bird's name in relation to its voice would be "courting dove."

If reproductive rates are any indication, that courting call is exceedingly effective. Doves nesting in southern states may raise as many as six broods in a mating season; Montana "mourners" typically incubate one or two clutches. Although clutch sizes are small (typically just two eggs), the species' habit of multiple nestings makes them one of North America's most abundant birds.

Add the fact that they taste good and are fun to hunt and it's no wonder mourning doves top the charts in annual bird harvest nationwide. Dove hunters shoot 15-20 million mourning doves each year, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Second place is pheasants with 3.3 million per year, and third is mallards, with 2.9 million. Texas is the number one state for dove hunter numbers (200,000 or so) and annual harvest (about 5 million). Opening weekend of dove season there is a festive occasion celebrated by families and communities.

As is the case with waterfowl, the USFWS estimates annual dove harvest by asking a random sample of dove hunters, when they buy the required state migratory bird license each year (federal migratory bird stamp not required), to report the number they killed the previous season. To estimate dove population numbers and trends, state and federal biologists trap mourning doves each summer and affix aluminum bands to their legs. Hunters are

urged to report harvested banded doves at reportband.gov.

Harvest information helps migratory bird managers set appropriate seasons and limits so that hunters don't overharvest doves and harm the population.

That's unlikely to ever happen in Montana, where mention of dove hunting is usually met with a *Huh?* Jim Hansen, Central Flyway migratory bird coordinator with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in Billings, says Big Sky Country hunters harvest only about 10,000 to 20,000 birds every year, averaging 10 to 15 birds each. "It's not on many hunters' radar," he says.

It should be, according to Dave Books, an avid hunter from Helena and former editor of this magazine. Books, who has hunted doves for nearly 40 years, says one appeal is that dove hunting doesn't require much hiking. Most hunters simply locate a spot where doves fly at various times of the day and stand or even sit until the birds come to them.

Another is you don't need a dog. Doves don't "hold" for a pointer as upland birds do, nor are they nudged from the ground by a flushing breed. Though retrievers can be a big help in finding downed doves in heavy cover, "wounded birds don't try to run or swim away like pheasants and ducks and can usually be retrieved by the hunter," Books says.

Then there's the fact that you often get to shoot a lot. The daily limit is 15 birds, so hunters in the right place at the right time can easily use up two boxes of shells. And though doves fly fast, making them tough to hit, they succumb to very light bird shot, making any shotgun adequate.

"At first my friend and I mostly shot doves incidentally when out hunting sharptails," says Books. "Then about 15 years ago we started making destination trips to eastern Montana solely for doves." Books has found that dove numbers start to grow once he reaches central Montana and increase further as he nears North Dakota.



TOUGH SHOT Doves are notoriously tricky birds to shoot, owing to their speed and often erratic flight pattern—what the outdoor writer John Madson dubbed their "odd flickering quality" in the air. Using a box of shells to harvest just a few doves is not uncommon, especially for beginners.

LEFT: LESTER A. KISH; RIGHT: COMPOSITE PHOTO BY JERRY NEAL/COLORADO PARKS AND WILDLIFE

Jack Ballard is an outdoor writer, book author, and photographer who lives in Red Lodge.

HOW TO DO IT

If that sounds fun, don't dally. Although a handful of mourning doves winter in Montana if temperatures don't drop too low, most head south to the southern United States or Mexico at the first burst of foul fall weather.

"Doves start bunching up into flocks in August," Books says. "After that, they usually don't stick around long unless the weather stays warm." Dove season opens in Montana on September 1, and Books says the first week or so produces the most dependable shooting. "But sometimes bad weather will push them out early. We've hunted cold, windy openers and not killed a single bird."

Hansen, the FWP migratory bird coordinator, says Montana can't move the state's dove opener to an earlier date because the USFWS sets hunting season frameworks for all migratory birds, including doves. "Also, we still have doves caring for their young in nests in August, so we wouldn't want to move the season to when those adult birds might be shot by hunters," he says.

Dove hunting might be one of the few silver linings to climate change. Hansen says Montana hunters have more days to hunt than they did 20 years ago. "The weather is



TINY TROPHIES Mourning doves weigh only 4 ounces, so it takes several to make a meal.

staying warmer later in September than it used to, so we typically get 10 or 15 good days in the season, versus just a few when I started," Hansen says.

To take advantage of this ever-widening window, Hansen says would-be dove hunters should scout early and late in the

day, when the birds are flying. Look for sorghum, wheat, barley, sunflowers, or other grains or seeds, with tall roosting trees and a pond, stock tank, or other water source nearby. "You'll also want to locate the landowner if it's on private land to obtain permission," he adds.

Doves prefer ponds and tanks out in the open with no dense foliage nearby where predators might lurk. But Books advises novice hunters not to focus solely on water when setting up to shoot. He's had his best shooting from sites along the flight paths between water and crop fields or wild sunflowers.

Although doves are hard to hit—a lead of up to 6 feet is not uncommon—they have a thin skin and often drop if struck with even a single pellet. Most hunters favor No. 7½ shot. Hansen says that even though doves are migratory birds, nontoxic shot is not required except on federal wildlife areas. "But for hunters who prefer to use nontoxic loads, steel 7s and 6s work well," he says.

All this was news to me. Though I've been hunting ducks and upland birds since I was a teenager, I only stumbled upon dove hunting last year and have been learning as much as I can ever since.

The other doves

Mourning dove hunters will no doubt encounter two similar species. These non-native doves can be legally hunted and provide a dark, rich meat similar in color and taste to that of mourning doves.

Rock doves (pigeons) have inhabited Montana for decades. They're usually blue gray, but some also have white or reddish coloration. All rock doves have a dark beak and a white, cartilaginous protrusion atop the beak. As well as in cities and towns, rock doves hang around farmsteads and rocky outcroppings near fields. They are bigger and bulkier than mourning doves.

Eurasian collared-doves look a lot like mourning doves but are larger and heavier. They are more grayish than the tan-colored mourning doves and have a black "collar" on the back of the neck. Collared-doves are fairly new to the state but have dramatically expanded their range in the past two decades. Like rock doves, they



Mourning dove



Eurasian collared-dove



Rock dove (pigeon)

mostly hang out in urban areas and around farmsteads, especially those with mature trees.

With the rapid range expansion of Eurasian collared-doves, many biologists worried the birds would displace native mourning doves. But in Montana that doesn't appear to be the case. "Competition with Eurasian collared-doves could be detrimental in local areas, but they tend toward cities and towns more than mourning doves, which mostly occur in rural areas," says Jim Hansen, FWP Central Flyway migratory bird coordinator. ■



FAMILY OUTING The author's daughter and wife with six doves taken in mid-September.

PRINTING OUT DECOYS

My discovery came on a block management area during opening day of bird season. Our English setter, Percy, found only a single covey of sharp-tailed grouse before it got too hot for him to continue. He and I headed toward home along a dusty gravel road that dipped into a low draw filled with brush and a few tall green ash trees. As I passed, I saw a dozen doves perched on a barbed-wire fence. A few more sat on the spindly upper branches of the trees.

Dog at heel, I ducked into the brush and sneaked to within range of a trio of birds lounging in a treetop. They flushed as we emerged from cover, and when my shot connected, Percy happily retrieved the downed dove. After taking three more birds, I noticed a stock tank brimming with water on the opposite side of the road. Not many minutes later a lone bird hurtled out of the brilliant

blue sky to perch on a post near the tank. It then glided to the rim of the metal reservoir to drink.

After returning home, I called a friend from Tennessee who knows all about Southern bird hunting. "They'll hit that stock tank again this evening," Kerry assured me. "If you had some decoys it would sure help."

Dove decoys? Oh, right, I'll just run down to the general store in Red Lodge and pick up a dozen from their expansive selection. Ha, ha.

But then I went online and discovered a simple, cheap solution. On its website, Colorado Parks and Wildlife features a two-sided photo of a dove that can be printed, cut out, and pasted onto cardboard (see sidebar below). I enlisted Zoe, my college-student daughter, to help with the cutting and pasting, promising as reward an epic dove hunt. After just two hours we'd produced a dozen fine-looking two-sided, two-dimensional

dove decoys that I protected with a quick spray of lacquer.

Late that afternoon, Zoe, my wife Lisa, and I returned to the watering hole on the block management area. Percy tagged along to help pick up birds, but his enthusiasm waned when he saw we weren't planning to head out on a long hike, as we usually do when bird hunting. After clipping the decoys to the wire fence around the stock tank, the three of us plopped onto folding chairs behind a screen of brush, and Percy lay down with a sigh.

Sure enough, doves came to the water, and some even seemed attracted by the very flat kinfolk we'd perched on the rusty barbed wire. But luring doves within shooting range is one thing; actually hitting one of these speedy birds is another altogether. After firing maybe 50 rounds total, the three of us managed to down a dozen birds. By no means was that enough to fill the freezer, but it was still plenty for a dinner of fried breaded dove breasts. Our sad setter, deprived of a romp across the prairie, even had a chance to show his stuff by retrieving a dove that fell into a tangle of chokecherries.

As for my daughter, wife, and me, we had a blast, despite all our misses. Pheasants, sharptails, and mountain grouse are still our preferred game birds, but we're pleased to now have another early season option. And the fact that we don't have to walk for miles to hunt doves means we can work on our wing shooting skills while saving our legs for the more arduous bird hunts later in the season. ■

Make your own decoys

Doves are more likely to fly within shooting range if you post a few dozen decoys close to your hiding spot, especially if you are near or between crop fields and water. Plastic decoys are available online and in some of Montana's larger sporting goods stores, but you can make your own in a few hours if you have a color printer, scissors, glue, and cardboard. Find instructions for this fun and easy activity at coloradooutdoorsmag.com/2013/08/26/diy-dove-decoys/. ■



Paper decoys mounted to cardboard can be clipped to dried plant stems, tree branches, or wire fences.