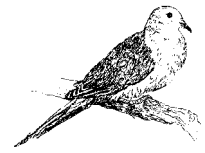




The Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife Resources Division
MOURNING DOVE FACT SHEET



The mourning dove (*Zenaidura macroura*) is one of the most common birds in Georgia – known both to hunters as a challenging game bird and to homeowners as an occasional visitor to feeders. Almost everyone recognizes its mournful cooing “song” – from which it gets its name.

RANGE AND HABITAT

The mourning dove is one of twelve species of doves and pigeons in North America. It ranges widely over the continent, from Canada to Mexico and the Caribbean Islands, and from coast to coast. The northern extent of its range has gradually expanded over the last several years. Mourning doves are habitat generalists, meaning they are able to live in many different habitat types. They can be found in the mixed-use landscapes of the east, the vast farmlands of the midwest, and dry, desert regions in the west. The only habitat where doves rarely are seen is the interior of large tracts of unbroken, mature forest. In Georgia, doves are abundant and found throughout the state. There is little doubt that they were one of the bird species that benefited from man’s clearing of large forests and subsequent cultivation of land. Newly created forest openings and agricultural fields provided habitat for the growth of native forbs, grasses and agricultural crops where doves found abundant seeds.

BIOLOGY

One reason doves are so adaptable is their diet. Doves eat seeds from a variety of different plants, including those from cultivated crops and native vegetation. Many of the seeds are small and difficult for a person to see. Doves also ingest small pebbles, or grit, that aid in the digestion of hard-coated seeds. Unlike some birds, which can satisfy their water requirement from dew or various food items, doves need to drink surface water, at least occasionally. They often drink water from ponds, creeks, and even water-filled ditches and potholes. With respect to nesting habits, doves are adaptable and may utilize a number of different nesting sites. Dove nests are rather flimsy when compared to nests of other birds. In Georgia, dove nests commonly are located in the branches of pine trees, but also have been found on vine-covered trellises, window ledges and even old abandoned vehicles.

Mourning dove nesting cycles are relatively brief – about 28 days for the entire cycle. The first half is spent incubating the eggs (almost always two) while the second half involves brood rearing of young doves (called “squabs”). Part of brood rearing involves feeding squabs on “pigeon milk” - a milk-like substance secreted by the crop gland of adult doves and pigeons. Pigeon milk is nutritious and energy rich and the squabs grow quickly.

Doves use this short nesting cycle to their advantage, as they will attempt to nest several times a year, especially in Georgia and other southern portions of their range. Adult males and females will pair for the year and both sexes are actively involved in the nesting cycle, from nest building, to egg incubation, to feeding of squabs.

The brief mourning dove nesting cycle, and the fact that they will attempt to nest multiple times a year, is better understood if consideration is given to their short lifespan, which averages only one and a half years. Primary sources of mortality include predation and diseases. Natural predators of doves include a number of predatory birds, mammals and snakes. Major diseases include avian pox and trichomoniasis, which are not transmissible to humans.

MANAGEMENT

Mourning doves are migratory – especially doves in northern portions of their range. As a migratory species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) ultimately is responsible for mourning dove management in the United States. In states with a dove hunting season, such as Georgia, state wildlife agencies are allowed to set seasons and bag limits within a framework established by the USFWS. State wildlife agencies also cooperate with the USFWS in monitoring the annual dove population status through various surveys, such as the call-count survey and breeding bird survey.

Presently, doves are hunted in thirty-seven states. In terms of harvest, they are the number one game bird in the country and in Georgia. In fact, more doves are harvested than all other migratory game birds combined. In 2002, there was an estimated 22 million and 1.6 million doves bagged in the U.S. and Georgia, respectively. Furthermore, there are about 60,000 active dove hunters in Georgia. Dove hunting provides recreation and good table fare. Additionally, in southern states like Georgia, dove hunting often is a highly social affair with friends and families enjoying a day of hunting, eating and socializing.

Most dove hunting is done on or around agricultural fields. Doves congregate around recently harvested crop fields of corn, peanuts, millet, and sunflowers. Dove hunters often will plant fields in these crops and/or other favored plantings for the sole reason of providing a dove hunting opportunity. Other field features, such as nearby watering sources and perching places such as snags (dead trees) and power lines, add to the field’s appeal to doves. Shooting doves over baited fields is illegal, thus it is important to know what constitutes legal dove hunting. Two publications by the Georgia DNR-Wildlife Resources Division, *Dove Hunting And Agricultural Practices in Georgia* and *Small Game Management in Georgia*, provide more information on legal dove hunting and are available through WRD Offices or online at www.gohuntgeorgia.com. Hunters also may contact a local WRD Law Enforcement or WRD Game Management office for more information on dove hunting legalities.