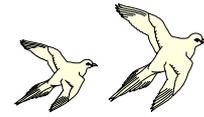


DOVE FIELD MANAGEMENT



The mourning dove (*Zenaida macroura*) is one of the most popular of all game birds and dove shoots have long been a southern tradition. Factors important to consider in selecting and managing fields for doves include: a) field size and location; b) types of plantings; c) manipulation of plantings; d) frequency and intensity of hunting; and e) other considerations.

FIELD SIZE AND LOCATION

Doves are strong fliers and prefer large expanses of open area for daily movements. Fields that are 10 acres or more in size tend to have the best potential for concentrating huntable numbers of birds and larger is better. Fields located in an agricultural landscape tend to receive higher use than those that are surrounded by extensive woodlands. Also, in hilly terrain, fields on ridges seem to be used more than fields in bottomlands. This doesn't necessarily mean fields that are less than 10 acres in size and/or located in bottomlands or with surrounding woodlands won't receive use, but in general, these are less than ideal for attracting huntable numbers of doves.

Water is an important habitat component for doves. Fields with a readily available water source often attract and hold more birds than those fields without nearby water. Since doves avoid grassy or thick vegetation, ponds with clean edges and/or mud flats are preferred.

TYPES OF PLANTINGS

Doves feed on a variety of seeds from native and cultivated plants. Some of the more highly preferred native foods include pokeweed, ragweed, dove croton, and foxtail grass. A number of agricultural plantings are attractive to doves, including: browntop millet, dove proso, grain sorghum, corn, peanuts, soybeans, sunflowers, wheat, and many others. However, wheat, browntop millet, corn, sunflowers, and dove proso are some of the best choices for planting in dove fields. Crops should be planted in strips 30 to 150 feet wide and managed to provide food throughout the year. Warm season plantings should be made both early (April 1 – May 1), and late (June 1 – July 15) so they are maturing at different times throughout the summer. Wheat should be planted in the fall. This will make food available and begin attracting doves early in the summer, thereby resulting in greater numbers of birds when the season opens in September. Corn, grain sorghum, and sunflowers can be planted in strips in the middle of larger fields to provide both food for doves and cover for hunters. In areas of high deer populations, Egyptian wheat can be used for cover rows since it is less preferred by deer. See the attached planting guidelines for seed and fertilizer recommendations for all of the plant species mentioned above.

MANIPULATION OF PLANTINGS

Doves are strong fliers, but they have fragile legs and feet and are weak scratchers. They prefer to land and feed in fields with very little vegetative ground cover. Therefore, practices that result in seed on relatively bare ground are the most attractive to doves. Mowing, disking, burning, and "hogging" (feeding by hogs, cattle, or other live stock) fields are all legal practices that can be applied to fields being managed for dove hunting. As long as the feed is the result of a bona fide agricultural practice it is considered legal. This is defined in a brochure available from the DNR, Wildlife Resources Division.

The following is a cookbook example of a dove field management regime:

1. **October – November:** Get soil samples tested. Prepare ground by periodic harrowing to condition soil for planting.
2. **November:** Plant 1/3rd to 1/2 of field in Stacey or Saluda Wheat in strips 50 to 150 feet wide. Be sure to fertilize and lime according to soil test for grain production.
3. **April-May:** Plant 1/4 to 1/3rd of field in browntop millet in strips 50 to 150 feet wide.
4. **June:** Plant 1/4 to 1/3rd of field in strips of browntop millet 50 to 150 feet wide. Plant cover rows for hunters in corn and/or sunflower and/or grain sorghum. During drought years sunflower may hold up better than corn. However, sunflower is a preferred deer food and is not suited to small fields in areas with high deer densities. Cover rows should be at least 50 yards apart for hunter distribution.
5. **July:** Mow, burn and disk wheat and begin mowing early millet as it matures.
6. **August:** Continue to mow disk and burn strips to make feed available
7. **November – February:** Plant wheat strips for following year and mow hunter cover rows to provide fall and winter food.
8. Field borders, hedgerows, and center-pivot corners can be used to provide habitat for quail, while providing cover for hunters around and across fields being managed for doves.

There are many variations of the above suggestions that will produce good results. For example, sunflowers can be planted instead of millet. If sunflowers are kept clean underneath, doves will begin using them while they are still standing by lighting and feeding on the seed heads and feeding on the ground underneath. Spraying with 2 pints per acre of Gramoxone (a chemical desiccant) will expedite the maturity rate of sunflowers. The disadvantage is that sunflowers are expensive to grow, less tolerant of drought than millet, and are subject to deer damage.

FREQUENCY AND INTENSITY OF HUNTING

Too much hunting pressure will cause doves to abandon a field, even if there is an abundance of food. A good rule of thumb is to shoot dove fields only once per week and either in the morning or afternoon but not at both. Shoots should be of short duration (≤ 3 hours) allowing the remaining birds to feed without disturbance. This will result in prolonged use of the field by doves, providing greater hunting opportunity throughout the season. Of course, hunters should check the current year's dove regulations for season dates and times and always abide by the daily bag limit.

Other Considerations

Perching: Dead trees or power lines are important for doves as perch sites.

Water: Not absolutely critical, but is a bonus for field location. Must have bare ground next to water source.

Disturbance: During late summer, disturbance of doves should be kept to a minimum to minimize the chances of the birds moving to another field

Pest Control: Crop plantings should be monitored for weed and insect invasions and appropriate steps should be taken to control pests. For example, armyworms can ruin a field and must be sprayed with an appropriate insecticide to be controlled. Consult your local County Extension Agent for recommendations on using pesticides.

Crop Rotation: Rotate wheat and millet plantings so that millet volunteers back into wheat. This can also be accomplished with sunflowers.

Planting: Plant spring and summer crops within two days after the soil is harrowed to aid in weed competition. If possible, plant corn, sorghum, and sunflowers in rows and cultivate to keep the ground as clean, which encourages use by doves.

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