

ATTRACTING DOVES TO YOUR LAND



**Cooperative Extension Service/The University of Georgia
College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences/Athens**

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Facts About Doves

Description

Genus and species: *Zenaida macroura* (mourning dove)

Length: 11 to 13 inches

Adult weight: 3 1/2 to 5 1/2 ounces

Color: primarily slate blue above and reddish brown below; adult males have a bluish iridescence on crown and nape and a pinkish sheen on the breast, white spots on tips of tail feathers, a black spot behind the eye, a black bill, reddish legs and feet; young birds have buffy edging on primary wing coverts.

Similar species: ground dove, domestic pigeon, passenger pigeon (extinct)

Biology

Nesting: about 30 days from start of nest building to the departure of the young

Nest: about five inches in diameter; constructed of small twigs, pine needles and plant stems

Nesting season: in the Southeast - February to October, with 80 percent of production between April 7 and September 7

Clutch size: two pure white eggs

Incubation: 14 days

Nestling stage: 11 to 12 days

Development of young: Fly at 12 days; have adult plumage at three to five months

Food: seeds, especially of grasses; parents feed young pigeon milk

Mortality: about 50 percent of dove population dies each year

Speed of flight: usually 30 to 40 miles per hour, maximum 55 miles per hour for short spurts

ATTRACTING DOVES TO YOUR LAND

Mourning doves are plain, gray wild pigeons known for their mournful calls. They are common visitors to bird feeders and are sporty game birds. The mourning dove is the most common of the three species of wild pigeons and doves in eastern North America. Nationwide, there are 10 species of pigeons and doves, and 289 species worldwide.

The mourning dove is a marvelously well-qualified game species. Doves are abundant, fly fast and are not particularly wary. They provide more shooting than any other game bird in the United States. Dove hunts have long been a Southern tradition, as a test of skill and a chance to spend time with friends. At one time, dove season was part of the celebration of the harvest. Today, dove hunts are a break from the daily routine, a primary goal for many hunters and a source of income for rural landowners. Dove season is the beginning of the fall hunting season and is a kind of hunting that emphasizes shooting skills and quick reactions rather than stalking and woodcraft.

Dove populations can quickly replenish numbers after heavy losses. This bulletin gives information on the habits and needs of doves and explains how to attract doves for hunting.

Habitat of Doves

Doves are such common birds in agricultural areas that it's easy to assume they are abundant everywhere, but this is not so. Doves are adapted to open country, and are most abundant in the naturally open grasslands of the central prairie states. In the Southeast, which would be forested under natural conditions, agricultural activities help dove populations by keeping land open. Doves are uncommon in vast forested areas, marshes, swamps and other places where open land and bare ground are scarce. In the Southeast, if agricultural land were abandoned and naturally reverted to forest, doves would decline and forest birds would increase.

In the Southeast, doves depend on the earliest stages of plant succession for most of their food needs. Plant succession is the natural progression of plants that occupy land, starting from bare ground and evolving into weeds, bushes, saplings and,

eventually, large trees. This type of plant succession is normal in the Southeast and as it advances, doves become scarcer. Unlike quail, doves have short, weak legs and are not adapted for scratching. They prefer the bare land and weedy stages of plant succession, although they do eat some kinds of tree seeds. Tree seeds, like other foods, must fall on bare ground to be available to doves. Agricultural practices are constantly setting back plant succession, thereby providing seeds of weeds and cultivated crops. This food supply helps make doves so abundant.

Dove nests are normally widely scattered in trees and bushes of many kinds, so nest sites are not a limiting factor. In the prairie states, where trees are scarce, doves often nest on the ground. If bushes and trees occur in isolated patches, doves may nest in them at densities of dozens per acre. In the Southeast, doves use tall trees, especially pines, to roost, and they use streams and ponds with bare edges for water sources. Because doves travel easily, it is enough if these necessities exist within a few miles of food. This is in contrast to quail, for example, which require adjacent cover, food and water to survive.

Reproduction

Courtship and Nest Building

In winter, dove populations are at their lowest point. The birds use tall trees for roosting at night. By day, doves fly out to fields and open areas to feed. The reproductive season starts with courtship on the earliest warm days of January in the coastal plain and a little later further north. The male sits on a perch near the female and coos. The reproductive organs begin to enlarge. As spring advances, the birds linger around a suitable nesting habitat of pines, shrubs or vine tangles. Nesting begins in February in the coastal plain and is delayed about a week for each 50 to 100 miles north. The percentage of the population nesting increases rapidly as the days lengthen. Mourning doves nest in rural and suburban areas, but nests tend to be near open areas and are uncommon in the interior of dense woods. Nests may be located a few feet off the ground or

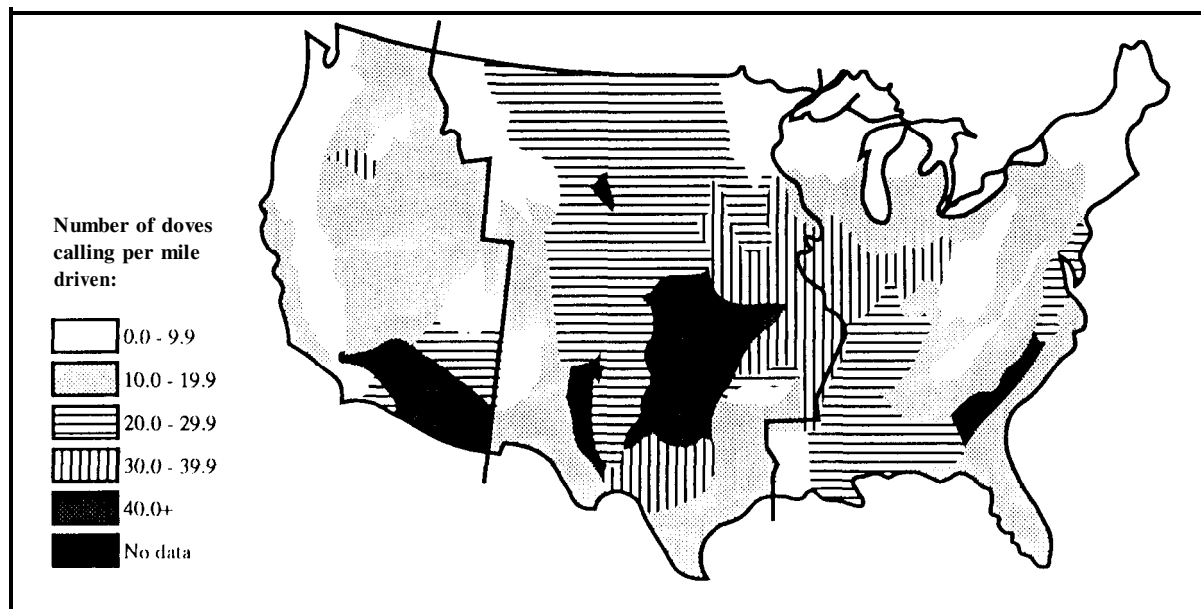


Figure 1. Average mourning dove populations in the United States

near the tops of the tallest trees; most are found within 10 to 25 feet of the ground. Doves carry little sticks, pine needles, rootlets and weed stems to a suitable place on a branch. They take about a week to make a flimsy nest, which is sometimes so sparse that one can see the eggs through the nest from below.

Egg Laying and Incubation

Two white eggs are laid on consecutive days. Parents take turns incubating the eggs. Normally, the female is on the nest from 3 p.m. to 10 a.m. and the male incubates from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. The incubating bird may crouch low in the nest when approached, or it may fly off and sit in a nearby tree.

Hatching and Nestlings

The eggs hatch on consecutive days, 14 days after being laid. The chick pips a hole in the egg and chips a neat line around the eggs so that the large end folds off like a cap. The nestlings are covered with thin down and are helpless except for being able to gape for food. The parents feed the nestlings a mushy white cheesy material (pigeon's milk) that is sloughed off the inside of their crop. Because they manufacture this food for the nestlings, parents do not need to leave the nest frequently to search for food, as do most songbirds. When a person or predator approaches the nestlings, the parent may leave the nest as a distraction and crash flapping and struggling as though injured, to lure predators toward the parents and away from the nest.

Fledglings and Growth to Maturity

Normally the young fledge (leave the nest) 11 to 13 days after hatching. They may leave a few days early if alarmed. A few linger in the nest up to 18 days. The parents feed the young less and less, and sometime during the two weeks after leaving the nest the young become independent. Fledglings gradually increase their activity until they are feeding and flocking with other doves.

Up to three to five months of age, young doves can be distinguished from adults. Immature birds have a light-colored margin on many of their feathers. The simplest way to distinguish between young doves less than three to five months old and adults is to look at the primary coverts, which are the small feathers on the shoulder of the wing that overlap the long feathers on the wing (see Figure 2). If any of these primary coverts are light-tipped, the bird was hatched earlier in the year. As molting progresses, these feathers are shed, starting at the base of the primaries and moving out toward the wing tip. Birds with buffy margins on the tips of many primary coverts are likely to be younger than those with few immature primary coverts. After all the immature feathers have been replaced, the young doves have their full weight and cannot be distinguished from adults.

Nest Losses and Renesting

Successful dove nests require about 30 days from the start of the nest building to the departure of the young. In the Southeast, 80 percent of nesting occurs between the end of the first week in April and the end of the first week of September. During this

Migration and Population Dynamics



Figure 2. The top wing is from a juvenile and can be identified by buff-colored tips. The middle wing is from an older juvenile, with a few buff-colored tips remaining. The bottom wing is from an adult and can be identified by the solid, unmarked feathers.

time, doves nest repeatedly and can have five successful nests. Northern states have a shorter nesting season.

Most dove nests are unsuccessful. Storms cause the most nest losses, followed by predators such as rat snakes, blue jays, crows, grackles, screech owls, raccoons and opossums, which take eggs or nestlings. If a nest is lost, the parents will begin another nest within a few days.

After wintering in the South, doves often concentrate into large flocks in late winter and early spring. In March and April these flocks break up and many birds move north, where they remain for the nesting season. During the summer breeding season, doves occupy all of the lower 48 states, portions of southern Canada, and much of Mexico (Figure 3). Doves begin to leave northern states after the first cold weather in late August or early September. The doves that remain in the South have a longer nesting season and make more nests than those in northern states. During nesting, the movements of parents are confined to a small area around the nest. After nesting, local parents and young birds use a home range of about 10 square miles and travel up to three miles between feeding sites in fields and roosts. Favored roosts are in tall pines. During the summer, the local population increases with the regular addition of young birds from the nests. When dove season opens in the Southeast, it is mainly local birds found in dove fields. After a few days of shooting, the birds may change their habits. Some will disperse from grain fields where there is shooting and move to feed in unhunted areas or the suburbs of nearby cities.

Nesting declines in September and ends in October. Some doves winter in northern states but the majority head south after the first cold weather in late August or early September. They fly south at an average of 10 miles a day. Contrary to popular stories, doves rarely fly faster than 35 miles an hour but they are capable of brief spurts of slightly more than 50 mph. Migrant doves provide an increasing percentage of the harvest in the late fall and early winter dove hunting seasons.

Population dynamics is the study of the increases and decreases in a population, and the factors that cause them. How can doves keep their numbers up in the face of heavy losses caused by hunting, nest losses, a short life span and a clutch size of only two eggs? Doves are not adaptable to a wide variety of habitats. Yet doves are more numerous than quail, turkeys and other birds that lay far more eggs. How can this be so?

Dove populations are near their peak in early September. At this time daily mortality averages four to five percent. As young birds get more experience the survivors increase their chances of living long enough to nest. Doves have a survivorship of about 50 percent. Banding studies show that about 53 percent of adults and 44 percent of young will survive for another year, and about 40 percent of nests pro-

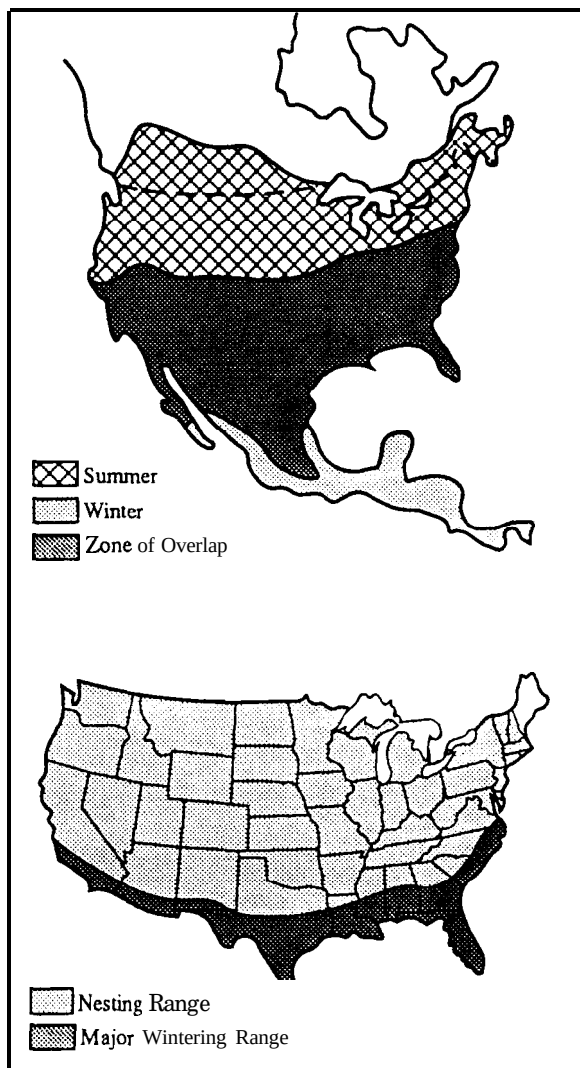


Figure 3. The top map shows the nesting range of the mourning dove in the United States; the bottom map shows the dove's distribution in North and Central America.

duce at least one fledgling. Hunters shoot about 50 million birds a year, out of a population of perhaps 500 million. Some doves are lost to diseases, such as trichomoniasis (an infection of the crop), and predators.

One reason for the abundance of mourning doves is that they are adapted to agricultural land. Land that is frequently broken, tilled, planted, even abused or eroded is beneficial to doves. Annual plants that invade cleared lands benefit doves, because these plants bear far more seed than perennials do.

A second reason for high numbers of doves is that they feed at the bottom of the food chain where there is more food available. The food chain starts

with plants, which are eaten by vegetarians, which are in turn eaten by predators. Doves need only plant food to survive, and plants are the most abundant food source in any ecosystem. Most birds, even grain eaters, cannot exist on plant food alone. They need at least a portion of their diet in the form of high-protein insects or other animal matter. Doves, on the other hand, can be healthy on a year-round diet composed exclusively of seeds, and they eat a wide variety of seeds, as compared to some animals that eat a limited variety.

Doves are not territorial, so they can tolerate nesting close to one another, unlike robins or mockingbirds, which are intolerant of close neighbors. Doves can live in social flocks and travel long distances to concentrated food sources.

Doves become independent from their parents at an early age. Even if the nest is successful the parents do not linger with the young or quit reproducing for the year. Quail, turkeys and wood ducks do not normally produce another nest that season if their young remain alive, but doves, if they are well-nourished, will renest within a few days of their young leaving the nest.

Doves are numerous because they have habits different from those that caused the extinction of their larger relative the passenger pigeon. The passenger pigeon nested in dense colonies, so it was easy for people to overexploit them. Mourning doves nest individually over a wide area, so their nests are not easy for people to find and destroy. Passenger pigeons used old oak and chestnut forests for nesting but the mourning dove could use the farmland created by the destruction of these forests. The passenger pigeon needed concentrations of food, and the mourning dove benefits from concentrated food sources such as grainfields, but can also thrive on sparse scattered food sources.

Wildlife biologists cannot claim credit for restoring and increasing dove populations the way they can for increasing other popular species such as deer, turkey and wood ducks. High dove populations are an accident of land use in the Southeast. Doves can rebound after almost any amount of hunting pressure. As a result, we can expect to have healthy dove populations in the future.

Food Preferences and Needs

Doves are strict vegetarians and exclusively seed eaters, with 99 percent of their diet seeds. They rarely feed on insects or other items, an unusual practice among birds, who usually eat high-protein

foods such as insects, at least while they are young. Quail, turkeys, ducks and songbirds eat insects and often animal matter exclusively during their first days of life. Doves, however, produce high-protein food from grain in the form of pigeon milk.

Doves prefer a wide range of seeds. They find food by sight or by seeing other birds feeding and they remember where they have found choice foods. Favorite foods are determined by taste, and the size of the seed is not an important factor. Choice foods include many species of wild and cultivated grasses as well as weeds, including euphorbias, crotons, ragweed, amaranth and many others. Legumes are almost never choice dove foods although doves do eat peanuts, peas, beans and some other legumes. Doves do not tend to eat acorns, or seeds of clovers, chufas, partridge peas, vetches and other plants.

Attracting Doves with Food and Water

Food is the key to dove abundance. Food doesn't need to be near cover because doves will travel far from roost trees into the open for food. They rely on their swiftness to escape predation rather than darting into nearby cover, as do quail.

SOWN SEED. Doves are attracted to fresh grain, usually wheat, sown as a normal agricultural planting. However, top sowing of any grain is not considered normal agricultural planting and it is not legal to hunt over top-sown grain. The legal specifics are beyond the scope of this bulletin. Ask your county Extension agent for information on planting wheat for agricultural purposes.

NATIVE PLANTS. Doves feed on the seeds of many plants as readily as they do the seeds of some cultivated crops. Often, native dove foods will volunteer on fallow lands and mature in time for dove season. Native plants can be very productive and inexpensive to produce. You can encourage them by disking broomsedge fields or other vacant lands in late winter or early spring to provide the most possible time for seed-bearing weeds to mature. Divide a field into sections and disk a portion every 30 days or so to approximately two months before you intend to hunt the field. Carefully note which desirable plants appear after each disking and develop your own schedules for growing native plants. Fertilizing native plants will increase seed production. Inspect fields of native vegetation about 90 days prior to the dove season, and examine the seedlings carefully. If seedlings of the preferred species (Table 1) are abundant, the field can be left to grow. If the field is dominated by plants not preferred by doves (Table 3), prepare the soil and plant a crop that will mature rapidly in the remain-

ing time before the season opens. Browntop millet and dove **proso** millet are common choices where a fast-maturing crop is needed. A compromise plan is to plant strips of cultivated crops at intervals through fields of native vegetation.

Two weeks prior to the start of hunting, mow one-third of the fields with a rotary mower to break up the plants and scatter the seed. Set the mower to cut low to the ground. Periodically freshen the field by mowing additional strips as needed. Some dove field managers prefer to mow fields with a side delivery mower and then rake and bale to create a cleaner surface that is more appealing to doves.

CROP RESIDUES. Doves often feed in agricultural fields after crops are harvested. Harvested fields of corn, sorghum, soybeans, millet, sunflowers, peanuts, melons and cucumbers are attractive to doves. Be alert to such opportunities so you can organize dove hunts on short notice. If possible, plan harvests about two weeks before the date of desired hunting. If plants are left standing after the harvest or if the ground is heavily covered with vegetation, mow with a rotary mower to remove cover and expose seeds.

WATER SOURCES. Watch streams and ponds during the dove hunting season. Doves concentrating at water sources create excellent places to hunt. Borders of ponds with shallow tapering shorelines can be mowed closely to make it easy for doves to land and drink.

Planting a Dove Field

The better you plan and care for your crop the more seed it will produce. The basic steps are to:

- ◆ prepare soil by tilling to eliminate weeds,
- ◆ select a variety adapted to your area,
- ◆ test soil and lime if necessary,
- ◆ plant seed at the proper rate and depth, and
- ◆ fertilize properly.

The details of planting are beyond the scope of this publication, but your county Extension agent has information on soil tests and crop production.

Crops to Plant

The most popular crops to plant for doves in the Southeast are browntop millet, dove proso millet, sunflowers, sorghum and corn (Table 4). These are all good for early and mid-season hunting. Corn and sorghum are often preferred for late-season hunting. Consider planting four to six rows of tall crops such as corn or sorghum as a border along the edge of short crops. This tall cover will help hide hunters.

Table 1. Some choice dove foods (arranged alphabetically)

Amaranth, redroot (*Amaranthus retroflexus*)
 slim (*A. hybridus*)
 Barnyard grass (*Echinochloa crotsgalli*)
 Birdseye (*Caperonia castaneaeifolia*)
 Bristlegrass, Faber's (*Setaria faberii*)
 green (*S. glauca*)
 yellow (*S. lutescens*)
 Browntop millet (*Panicum ramosum*)
 California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*)
 Canary grass (*Phalaris canariensis*)
 reed (*P. arundinacea*)
 Chickweed (*Stellaria media*)
 Columbus grass (*Sorghum alnum*)
 Corn (whole grain and cracked) (*Zea mays*)
 Croton, one-seed (*Croton monanthogynus*)
 Texas (*C. texensis*)
 tropic (*C. glandulosus*)
 woolly (*C. capitatus*)
 Euphorbia cyathophora Puerto Rico
 Euphorbia, bent (*Euphorbia geniculata*)
 painted (*E. heterophylla*)
 red (*E. preslii*)
 Geranium, Carolina (*Geranium carolinianum*)
 Harding grass (*Phalaris tuberosa stenoptera*)
 Hemp (*cannabis sativa*)
 Japanese millet (*Echinochloa crusgalli frumentacea*)
 Millet, foxtail (*Setaria italica*)
 Millet, Texas (*Panicum texanum*)
 Oat groats (*Avena sativa*)
 Panicum, blue (*Panicum texanum*)
 Dominican (*P. adspersum*)
 fall (*P. dichotomiflorum*)
 hidden-seed (*P. clandestinum*)
 shore-dune (*P. amarulum*)
 Paspalum, bull (*Paspalum boscianum*)
 giant (*P. giganteum*)
 Pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*)
 Pine, Eastern white (*Pinus strobus*)
 loblolly (*P. taeda*)
 lodgepole (*P. contorta*)
 longleaf (*P. palustris*)
 Ponderosa (*P. ponderosa*)
 shortleaf (*P. echinata*)
 slash (*P. ellioti*)
 Virginia (*P. virginiana*)
 Pokeberry, common (*Phytolacca americana*)
 stiff (*P. rigida*)
 Prickly poppy, hedgehog (*Argemone squarrosa*)
 Mexican (*A. mexicana*)
 western spp (*A. spp*)
 white (*A. alba*)
 Pros0 (*Panicum miliaceum*)

Table 1, cont.

Ragweed, common (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia*)
 Rape, winter (*Brassica napus*)
 Sorghum, grain (*Sorghum vulgare*)
 Sorgho (*Sorghum vulgare saccharatum*)
 Sudan grass (*Sorghum sudanense*)
 wild (*S. arundinaceum*)
 Sunflower, common (*Helianthus annuus*)
 prairie (*H. petiolaris*)
 Sweet gum (*Liquidamber styraciflua*)
 Switch grass (*Panicum vitgatum*)
 Turkey mullein (*Eremocarpus setigerus*)
 Wheat (*Triticum spp*)

Table 2. Some fair dove foods, (arranged alphabetically)

Bahia grass (*Paspalum notatum*)
 Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*)
 Buckwheat (*Fagopyrum sagittatum*)
 Chicken corn (*Sorghum vulgare drummondii*)
 Cowpeas, Tory, combine, iron clay, red ripper,
 and blackeyed (*Vigna sinensis*)
 Crabgrass, hairy (*Digitaria sanguinalis*)
 Johnsongrass (*Sorghum halepense*)
 Lespedeza, Kobe (*Lespedeza striata*)
 Korean (*L. stipulacea*)
 Melochia, cluster (*Melochia corchorifolia*)
 Oat in hull (*avena sativa*)
 Panicum, beaked (*Panicum anceps*)
 Ragi millet (*Eleusine coracana*)
 Rice (*Oryza sativa*)
 Rye (*Secale cereale*)
 Salvia, Lyre-leaf (*Salvia &rata*)
 Sesame (Benne) (*Sesamum indicum*)
 Smartweed, Pa. (*Polygonum pennsylvanicum*)
 Soybean (*Glycine max*)
 Sunflower, giant commercial (*Helianthus annuus*)

Table 3. Examples of plant seed not preferred by doves (arranged alphabetically)

Acorns, 19 species (*Quercas*)
 Alyce clover (*Alysicarpus vaginalis*)
 Arborvitae, Oriental (*Thuja orientalis*)
 Beak rush, horned (*Rynchospora corniculata*)
 Bean, mung (*Phaseolus aureus*)
 Bean, Tenn. black (*Glycine soja*)
 Beechnuts (*Fagus americana*)
 Brome, Blando (*Bromus mollis*)
 Cucumonga (*B. carinatus*)
 Bulrush, salt-marsh (*Scirpus robustus*)
 Burnet (*Sanguisorba spp*)
 Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*)

Table 4. Guide to favorite plantings for **dove fields**

PLANT ¹	SOIL& pH ²	PLANTING RATE	PLANT DATE	TIME TO MATURITY ³	REMARKS
millet, browntop	well-drained 6.0	drill 8-10 lbs seed/acre; broadcast 15-20 lbs/acre	April 1- July 1	60-70 days	Can produce 1200 lbs. of seed/acre; plant 1/2 - 1" deep; can be sowed on top of ground
millet, pros0	well-drained 6.0	drill 9-10 lbs/acre; broadcast 15-20 lbs/acre	April 1- July 1	75-80 days	Can produce 1500 lbs. of seed/acre; plant 1/2 - 1" deep; can be sowed on top of ground
corn	fertile, well-drained loam 6.0-6.8	space at 8-10" in 36" rows (ca. 7 lbs/acre)	March 15- June 1	80-100 days	Plant 1 - 2" deep; can produce 5600 lbs. of seed/acre
sorghum, grain	all 5.8-6.2	drill 5-8 lbs/acre in 36-44" rows, with 2-8" between plants; broadcast 10-20 lbs/acre	March 15 July 1	95-130 days	Plant 1 - 2" deep; deer may eat grain in ear can produce 2500 lbs. of seed/acre
sunflower	all, but best on fertile loam	broadcast 5 lbs/acre in 36" rows; 12" apart in row	June 1- June 30	90-100 days	Plant 1" deep; small plants very vulnerable to deer damage; can produce 1200 lbs. of seed/acre; choose small-seeded types
wheat	well-drained, heavy 6.0	drill 2 bushels/acre	N Ga: Oct. 15 Nov. 1 S Ga: Nov. 1.	180 days	Plant 1" deep; can produce 1500 lbs. of seed/acre; provides grazing for deer during fall, winter and spring

Ask your county Extension agent for:

1 Varieties recommended for local use, **2** Soil test to determine fertilizer and lime needs

3 Time is measured from time of seedling emergence to maturity

many doves. The reasons for this are known only to the birds. Productive fields often result in areas of mixed fields and forests, where there are few good feeding areas for doves.

CROP ANALYSIS. When doves feed, they store seeds temporarily in the crop before grinding and digesting. This allows them to complete their feeding in a short time. After you shoot doves, carefully examine the contents of the crop and see what the birds have been eating. Crop analysis will suggest native plants to grow to attract doves. To identify seeds, make a collection of known seeds by collecting seed heads and rubbing them between your palms to separate the seeds. Save the seeds in a little vial and compare seeds from dove crops with your reference collection. County Extension agents or other wildlife professionals can identify seeds or will forward them to others who can.

Hunting Doves

Organizing a Hunt

Dove hunts are social occasions as well as a chance to bag game, so it's nice when everything goes smoothly. Select shooting locations in advance and mark them so they are easily seen. Otherwise, hunters can inadvertently become crowded, get in each others way, and create a hazard. One hunter per acre is a safe density if stands are well laid out and hunters are reasonably careful. A map will help the hunters find their stands (Figure 4).

Post signs that indicate where the field is and where to park. Have hunters sign an agreement of your rules and regulations. You may wish to include a clause that states hunters are responsible for any accidents they cause.

Frequent hunting can deteriorate quality. Some fields can take more hunting pressure than others. If you want sustained hunting, avoid overhunting the field. Hunting about once or twice a week is com-

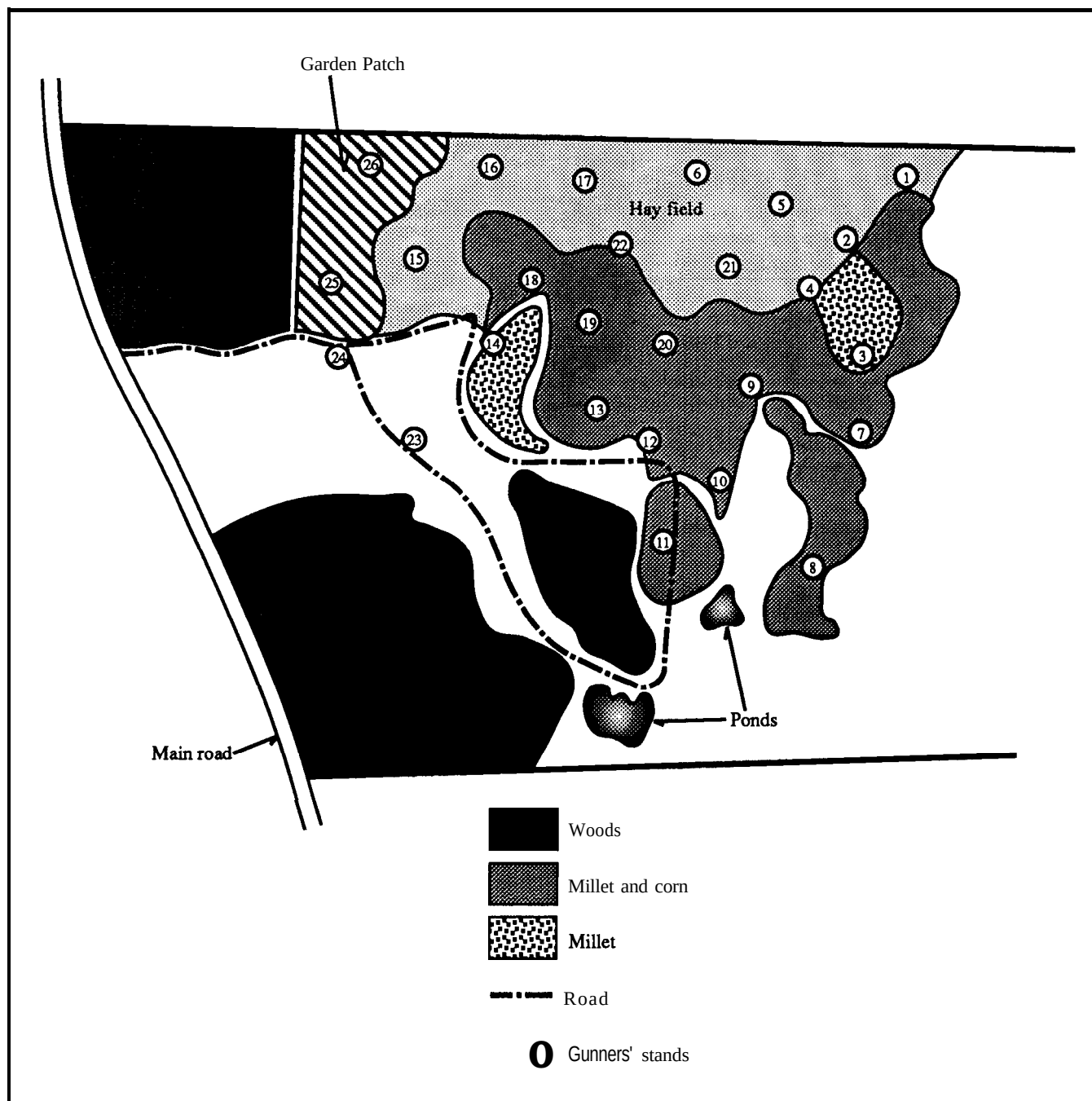


Figure 4. A sample layout of a dove field

mon practice. If two fields are close, hunting them simultaneously will keep the birds flying back and forth for fast action. If you want to maintain a population of birds in the area, hunt one field while maintaining the other as a temporary refuge.

There is a balance to be struck between getting your share of doves early and maintaining a productive dove field during the season. Although hunting accounts for perhaps 15 percent of all dove mortality, a high percentage of the harvest (70 percent in Tennessee, for example) occurs during the first 10 days of the season. After doves have been shot at for a few days, they tend to disperse to scattered food sources and afford little or no hunting.

Three or four hours is usually long enough for a shoot. You may wish to let doves feed the last hour or two of the day unmolested. It helps keep them coming to the field.

Guns

A variety of shotguns are suitable for dove hunting. Pump or autoloading shotguns in 12- or 16-gauge with modified chokes are popular choices. Size 8 shot is quite satisfactory, and 7 1/2 can be used. Avoid larger shot sizes on a dove field. Large pellets are less effective for doves and they carry farther than smaller shot, increasing the likelihood of injury in case of an accident.

Other Suggestions for Hunters

A spot next to tall plants or under a tree or bush makes it harder for the doves to see you, but hunters in the middle of large fields can also have excellent dove hunting opportunities. Camouflage can increase your chance of success. A stool will make you more comfortable and a cooler is handy for storing beverages and keeping birds fresh.

Note where birds fall - it makes them easier to find. Using a retriever makes for good conservation and is fun to watch. Make a serious effort to retrieve any downed bird. No more than the daily bag limit may be in your possession on the dove field. If your birds are placed in the possession of another hunter, the birds must be tagged with your name and address, your signature, the number of birds involved and the date the birds were killed.

Have a valid State hunting license at all times while hunting.

Any auto-loading or repeating shotgun must be limited to holding only three shells while dove hunting.

Songbirds, hawks, owls, killdeer, nighthawks, chimney swifts, woodpeckers and many other species should not be shot at or killed. These birds are protected by State and Federal regulations.

Pick up all trash, including spent shotgun shells.

Respect the landowner's wishes on all matters.

Baited Fields

It is your responsibility to determine if a field is baited. Dove hunting regulations are a part of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which is a strict liability statute. This means that guilt may be established without having to prove that the hunter had knowledge or intent to violate the law. Unfortunately, you may find yourself shooting on a baited field without knowing it is baited.

To find out if the field is baited, first, ask if the field is legal. If there is an unusually large concentration of doves and the field is freshly plowed, look under the soil for grain that is not a part of normal agricultural plantings and look for grain or other material attractive to doves that was not grown on the field. Remember, in all normal agricultural plantings, the grain is evenly distributed.



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by Jeff Jackson, Extension Wildlife Specialist

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AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

Bulletin 1056

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, The University of Georgia College of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating.

C. Wayne Jordan, Director