Rocket Hunters

Prairie state sportsmen enjoy one of the best dove populations east of the Mississippi.

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Illinois ranks as one of the top states in the nation.

Yes, we pull in our fair share of sports records and the state consistently draws attention for producing monster whitetail bucks. But we're also known for having phenomenal numbers of 10-inch, jet-fired birds that rocket over sunflower and corn fields each September.

The Prairie State is one of the nation's best dove hunting states—often ranking in the top three east of the Mississippi River and top seven in the country.

And the reason why our dove numbers are so high might surprise you.

"Part of reason for Illinois' tremendous mourning dove population is the fact that doves are thriving in suburban areas," said Ray Marshalla, Department

of Natural Resources migratory bird program manager. “With fewer aerial and ground predators present in the major cities, and landscaping that is conducive to successful nesting, Illinois has realized an annual harvest of more than 1.3 million each year for the last 14 years.”

The adaptable nature of this game bird has garnered it status as one of the most abundant birds in North America. Foraging on seeds and grains found in open habitats, the mourning dove acclimated well to the conversion of lands for agricultural and residential purposes.

Marking the location of downed birds helps for easy retrieval when hunting without a dog.

With the warming winds of February and March, doves begin constructing a flimsy nest of twigs, often placing it on a horizontal branch or in the crotch of a tree. In urban settings, dense vegetation and homes and commercial buildings sheltering nests from strong winds contribute to the tremendous nesting success of the species. A pair of doves can hatch as many as 6 young annually—an average of two eggs per clutch and three broods a season. Nationally, the estimated mourning dove population is between 350 and 600 million birds.

Known for darting, erratic flights and speeds of up to 55 miles per hour, how in the world can a population that size be determined?

Each May, state and federal wildlife biologists blanket the country along

In the heat of late summer, comfort takes precedence over camouflage, but today’s clothing options make comfortable camo an option.

Dove hunters must apply for a permit when hunting some state areas, while daily draws are conducted at other sites.

Four species legal

Season dates, daily limits and possession limits for mourning doves are in accordance with regulations established by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2007, Illinois accepted an offer the USFWS made to states east of the Mississippi River to include white-winged doves in the daily bag limit. Native to southwestern United States and Mexico, the range of white-winged doves is expanding eastward, and sightings in Illinois now occur.

The addition of this species makes it legal for licensed hunters to harvest four species during dove season: mourning and white-winged (Genus *Zenaida*) and Eurasian-collared and ringed-turtle (Genus *Streptopelia*) doves. Eurasian- collared and ringed-turtle doves are not indigenous species and are not federally protected species but they are protected by Illinois state law and administrative rule.

1,000 random, predetermined 20-mile routes to conduct call-count surveys, including 20 routes in Illinois. Stopping every mile along the route, biologists tabulate the number of doves seen or heard. The most recent 10-year trend for states east of the Mississippi River indicated no change in the number of doves heard, but a significantly increasing trend the number of doves seen.

A second survey technique used to estimate dove numbers is the breeding bird survey conducted each June when avid birders and Audubon members travel predetermined 24.5 mile routes. Data from these surveys shows a significantly increasing trend in doves in the eastern United States, and that Illinois is leading the nation with the highest 10-year increasing trend (nearly 5 percent compared with an average of 1.6 percent).

Dove hunters are finding that the increase in dove production in suburban areas equates to increased harvest in surrounding areas. In recent years, Illinois' highest harvests have been from counties in proximity to larger communities, such as Peoria, Chicago, Champaign, Bloomington, Springfield, East St. Louis and Marion.

Although only 6 percent of the state's estimated annual harvest of 1.5 million doves occurs on state-managed lands, these properties continue to supply nearly 14,000 man-days of hunting each year.

John Cole, manager of the DNR agriculture/grassland wildlife program, offers these suggestions for sportsmen interested in hunting doves on state sites.

"Dove hunters are advised to review the annual "Digest of Hunting and Trapping Regulations" and the DNR Web site well in advance of the season to learn more about site-specific regulations," Cole explained. "Sites that traditionally have heavy hunting demand early in the season often require apply-

Some dove hunters elect to use rotating-wing decoys to encourage birds to swing past their hunting site.

ing for a permit, while those with less pressure operate under a daily draw system. Also, the daily schedule and number of days each site is open for hunting varies depending on the amount of dove use and hunting pressure the site receives."

Illinois has joined with several Midwestern states in a research project designed to learn more about dove survival, migration routes and harvest rates.

Shot choice

Scientists estimate the scope of acute lead poisoning in doves from the ingestion of spent shotgun pellets may be much greater than the nation experienced prior to implementation of the non-toxic shot requirement for waterfowl hunting.

Approximately 60 percent of the state-managed sites currently require the use of non-toxic shot, and all encourage dove hunters to use steel or other non-toxic shot types. Non-toxic shot may cost a little more, but the cost is justified to help conserve our valuable dove resource.

For lead shot, the best choice is No. 8 shot, followed by No. 7½ shot. When selecting steel shot, No. 7 is best followed by No. 6. Bigger shot does not have enough pattern density to consistently hit doves, and most hunters are not good enough shots to need heavier shot to reach doves that are more than 30 yards away.

Finding doves

As with all types of hunting, understanding your quarry and its habits, and scouting the area in advance, are key to a successful hunt. Here are a few tips for improving your dove hunt.

- Look for watering holes. Doves usually use ponds with bare shorelines where they can watch for predators as they drink. A good feeding area will be within a couple of miles of a watering hole.
- Hunting over sunflower fields is good, but harvested corn fields also provide great hunting opportunities.
- Before flying into a feeding area, doves perch on dead tree branches to scan the area for predators. Power lines often are used as substitute perches.
- A source of grit is needed to aid in the digestive process. Doves commonly pick up grit from gravel roads and the sides of paved roads.
- Doves will range 3 to 5 miles from a roosting site that has tall trees or evergreens.
- Dove populations are quite high near suburban areas as trees and shrubs used for landscaping provide excellent dove-nesting habitat. Bird feeders also may play a role in improving winter survival for non-migratory birds.
- Rapid, erratic flight and size warrants selection of the appropriate choke for shot type. For lead shot, an improved cylinder is the preferred choke, and a skeet choke is best with steel shot as the steel stays in a tighter pattern than lead at ranges under 35 yards.
- On public lands where there are a number of hunters, the doves are all up and moving. When hunting alone, many dove hunters are finding that rotating-wing decoys come in handy and can make a difference in encouraging doves to swing by your spot in the field.
- Where allowed, many hunters are using dogs to retrieve downed birds. On steamy, late-summer days, remember to provide shade (use an umbrella in open fields) and water for your dog. Heat exhaustion can be a serious concern with dogs, even on days when hunters do not feel that warm. Cooler mornings and cloudy days with temperatures in the 70s are recommended.
- Hunters should wear camo, green or brown clothing and not move until the last moment when doves approach to keep the birds from flaring.

"Starting in 2006, district biologists and wildlife staff are banding about 1,500 doves a year at sites throughout the state," Cole explained. "Preliminary research from similar banding projects shows that most banded doves were harvested in the same state. This tends to support the premise that although the mourning dove is a migratory species, some birds remain in the area year-round."

Hunters are encouraged to check harvested doves for bands and to report band information on-line at www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl or by calling 1-800-327-BAND (2263).

Patience pays off for an early season dove hunter.