Illinois dove hunters topped the nation in doves per hunter in 2009. Perhaps it's because many have perfected the art of a late-season hunt.

Late-season Dove Hunting

Story By Ray Marshalla
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Late-season dove hunters can meet their daily quota by modifying their hunting techniques.

It opens with a quick blast, then quickly subsides—but it's not over for Prairie State dove hunters. Although most dove hunting in Illinois occurs during the first week or two of September—after which many dove hunters quit for the season—there are still great opportunities through October as well as November, especially since hunters can enjoy their pursuit without the usual crowds.

Some hunters assume doves migrate out of the area soon after that opening-day barrage. Many hunters move on to bowhunting or other outdoor activities in October. But dove hunting opportunities don't end after opening day. And doves are abundant in the Prairie State.

Based on band returns, the vast majority of doves shot in Illinois also hatched in Illinois, making Illinois one of the best dove hunting states in the country. According to federal harvest estimates, Illinois often is the No. 2 dove harvest state east of the Mississippi River with only California and Texas taking more doves in states west of the Mississippi. Illinois also has the best or second best hunter success rate (doves per hunter per day hunted) in the country.

Dove season is now a standard 70 days with a daily bag limit of 15. In 2009, Illinois hunters took an estimated 873,182 doves. As recently as 2007, hunters in Illinois shot 1,120,739 doves (Illinois' 2004 harvest estimate was

Hunters—and their hunting companions—enjoy the cooler weather during late-season dove hunts.

1,855,135 doves). Nationally, more than 20 million doves are taken annually.

How does one hunt doves late in the season? The key to good late-season dove hunting involves a lot of scouting to find out where the birds are feeding, roosting and going to water.

Advantages of late-season hunts includes cooler, more comfortable weather—not just for hunters, but also for retrievers which may succumb to heat exhaustion if used earlier in the season.

The best hunting areas usually are close to town since most Illinois doves nest in suburban backyards where habitat is good and houses protect nesting doves from high winds. Recently harvested cornfields with nearby power lines and roosting areas generally attract the most doves. Find such an area near a place that also has grit and a water hole and fantastic action can be all yours.

The best watering areas are ponds with bare shorelines where doves can avoid predators while taking a drink. Doves go to water after feeding in the morning and afternoon.

Scout a lot of areas to determine where the doves are feeding. Doves generally feed the first two hours after sunrise and then return for an afternoon feed. Earlier in the season, the afternoon feeding flight generally occurs around 3-5 p.m. As the days get shorter, this feeding time progresses earlier and earlier until the end of October and early November when prime feeding time may be as early as 1-3 p.m.

It is important to be in the field before the first doves arrive. Try to set up on the flight line into the field along a fence row or other cover. However, if you sit perfectly still and do not move until you're ready to shoot, you'll be surprised at how successful you can be with only corn stubble for cover. The key is not moving until the last possible second. Because doves have little fear of a vehicle in a field, it often is possible to drive into a field and sit in front of your vehicle, using it for shade.

Try watching doves for a day or two before hunting to determine where they enter and exit a field and set up accordingly. Just like many waterfowlers, dove hunters often find great success hunting from a layout blind.

To lure doves to shooting range, generally 30 yards or less, decoys can be helpful, especially if they are moving decoys. Some hunters put decoys on the ground or in bare trees but those on a wire extended between poles—the higher the better—will be much more noticeable. The most effective dove decoy is a rotating wing decoy, which may be seen by doves for several hundred yards and it gives the impression that other doves are landing in the field to feed. If you have two decoys, place both 15-20 yards in front of you, facing each other at a right angle so you have one line of sight and the doves see moving wings from any angle.

Rotating-wing dove decoys are effective as they give the illusion of doves landing in a field to feed.

With an understanding of dove movements and the ability to sit perfectly still, hunters can be successful with only corn stubble for cover.

Most doves are missed when hunters shoot behind them or use a sloppy gun mounting and shoot over the top of the target. If you keep your cheek against the stock of the gun and swing well in front of the bird your success should improve.

It also is important to use the correct choke and shot size. Steel shot is recommended, and may be required nationally in the near future. Using steel for doves also will improve your waterfowl hunting skills. Steel is faster than lead at ranges up to 30 yards and it holds a tighter pattern than lead with the same choke. Most hunters do best using a skeet choke and No. 7 steel shot, which provides good spread at close ranges and great pattern density. Doves can be consistently killed with this choke and shot combination at up to 40 yards, but most hunters have a hard time hitting doves beyond 30 yards. An improved cylinder choke can be used if you are a good enough shot to consistently take doves at ranges greater than 30 yards. When using lead shot, an improved cylinder works best for most hunters and a full choke is a handicap for all but the very best shots. Use No. 8 or 7.5 shot when using lead.

Once you shoot a dove, never take your eyes off the spot where it fell. Put your gun on safety and walk directly to that spot. You will be amazed at how much easier it is to find doves this way. Plus, you'll waste a lot less time looking while you might be missing the best gunning of the day.

During migration, large flocks of new doves can appear overnight. If it happens to be late in the season, you could have the action all to yourself. With pleasant temperatures, little, if any, competition and lots of fast action, you'll find late-season dove hunting can be a wildly enjoyable experience. Plus, there's the ultimate perk: Many hunters wrap up a successful day by wrapping their dove breasts in bacon and throwing them on the grill.

With a daily limit of 15 doves, it's a bacon-lover's dream.

For a quick retrieval of your harvest, keep your eye on the spot where the dove falls and walk directly to that spot.

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