



Your Side of the Fence

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Managing To Improve Dove Action

By Josh Richardson, Migratory Game Bird Biologist



The eastern sky begins to glow, and you've settled in against a fencerow with your equipment within easy reach. Pretty soon you hear the rhythmic

whistle of wings and look up to see a trio of "gray rockets" come to rest in a dead tree farther down the fence, surveying the open field before you. After a minute of vigilance, they're off again, crossing a little in front of you.

Three shots, and one bird falls, but OK, it's still early. One hour and hundreds of passing doves later, you pick up your 15th bird. As you head to the truck, you wish you could do this on your own property instead of someone else's. While it does require some acreage, equipment and time, it is possible on many properties statewide.

In the last issue of this newsletter, we discussed management everyone can do for doves by manipulating native habitat. This time we'll focus more on management of fields and food plots for doves. In Oklahoma, dove fields have traditionally been planted to wheat, millet or milo. More recently crops such as black-oil sunflower and canola have become more common.

All of these are suitable for attracting and holding doves, and each has characteristics to make them better suited for one location or another.

Due to the wide diversity of temperatures and rainfall across the state, it is highly advisable to contact your local Extension office or seed dealer for more details on planting (dates, soil temps, planting depth, etc.) and crop types. Make sure that whoever you consult understands **WHEN** and **HOW** you plan to use the field. Each plant, or variety of plant, has a defined maturity length, and "normal" planting dates for crops like sunflower or milo would result in plants maturing mid-September or later. Unlike a normal agriculture operation, having "weeds" in your dove field is not a bad thing; in fact it can add beneficial diversity (see

Winter 2014 "Your Side of the Fence" edition for a list of some of the better native "weeds"). On the other hand, a high percentage of bare ground in a dove field is extremely important, so starting with and maintaining a fairly clean field is beneficial. Folks unfamiliar with farming might think that after the seed has been planted, the job is done until right before hunting season. But one must stay vigilant while the field is growing to stop or reduce seed losses caused by disease, insects or other animals. Again, the issues that can arise are too varied to be fully covered here, but your local Extension agent or farm consultant can be an invaluable resource.

After 3-9 months of growing under "passive management," it is time to get active again as the opening day



Dove hunting can be productive in a field with bare ground.

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Manipulate only portions of a field at any one time so that feeding areas remain.

draws near. Starting in mid-August, you should begin manipulating parts of your dove field(s), exposing grain and providing a food source birds will begin to concentrate on. It is advisable to only manipulate portions of a field at any one time. Manipulations spread out over a period of 4-6 weeks can provide a continuous high-quality feeding area well into the season. Recall that doves have weak legs and cannot easily feed where there is a lot of plant material on the ground. You should try to match the field manipulation with the type of crop growing there. Mowing plants with robust stems and many leaves will often leave a rough surface with a thick layer of plant material, so, most of the seed you worked so hard to produce becomes unavailable to the doves you were trying to attract. Alternately, disking a light, fine-stemmed crop will likely incorporate most of the seed into the ground, also making it unavailable to doves. In Oklahoma, burning or a combination of mowing and burning is the manipulation of choice for dove fields, but each field and each circumstance (including equipment and personnel needs) will require its own decision about the proper management technique.

One of the questions I most often receive from hunters is what is and is not legal to do in a field managed for doves, or what is considered baiting. That is a good question, and it gets kind of confusing if one also hunts waterfowl or cranes. Hunting dove in or over fields of standing or manipulated grain is legal. Manipulation includes mowing,

burning, disking or spraying. **PLEASE NOTE, HOWEVER, THAT TEAL AND SEPTEMBER GOOSE SEASONS, COINCIDE WITH DOVE SEASON AND HUNTING TEAL OR GEESE ON A MANIPULATED FIELD IS CONSIDERED BAITING.**

After putting time and effort into creating this dove field, you will likely hunt it more than once and want to invite others over to hunt as well. Hunting morning and evening, in every part of the field, will result in a great looking field with very little dove use in very short order. Instead, leave a portion (around 10-20%) unhunted, or hunt the field only once a day. This provides an area or time of protection that allows birds to remain comfortable coming to the field to feed, instead of "burning" out a field hunting too hard or often. As cool fronts pass through, many of the resident birds that used your field will begin to head south, but new arrivals will quickly take to your field as they follow the feeding cues of remaining resident birds.

Hopefully this series of dove management articles has shown you new or different ways to improve your property for doves, whether through native plant management, or through more resource-intensive ag-type management. Come September and October, there is no reason for you to have only a handful of birds, a half-empty box of shells and be staring at an empty sky.