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FLORIDA'S EXALTED DOVE HUNTING

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ABSTRACT

Public dove hunting has become very popular among sportsmen in Florida. Since 1961, a program adopted from the "Williamston Plan" of 1929 has provided an orderly harvest with accurate harvest records on an equitable economically self-supporting basis. Through cooperative lease contracts with landowners, the fields are opened to public hunting for a \$2.00 daily permit fee. The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission selects fields and plants grain food to concentrate dove populations. More each year public dove fields help supply hunting for hunters who otherwise might not have an opportunity to hunt.

A public hunting program can provide hunting for sportsmen who would otherwise not have an opportunity to hunt. Such programs have for this reason gained rapid popularity among sportsmen in several states.

Most controlled dove hunting programs are patterned after a controlled hunting system called the "Williamston Plan" developed in 1929 (Wight 1931). The idea originated in Michigan as a cooperative agreement between landowners, sportsmen, and conservationists from the University of Michigan who were interested in providing an orderly harvest with thorough harvest records. It was financed by receipts from hunting permit sales. Similar systems have been credited with creating good sportsmen-landowner relationships (Hicks 1938). Controlled public hunting in Florida began with the establishment of Gulf Hammock Wildlife Management Area in 1949. The idea has grown into a system of 54 public hunting areas. Its evolution through 1952 is described by Frye (1952).

Since the inclusion, in 1960, of "normal agriculture plantings" in the hunting methods permitted for migratory birds, public dove hunting programs have rapidly expanded. These programs are designed by various state game and fish agencies to provide increased dove hunting opportunities on an orderly, equitable basis. Though each state designed its own program to regulate both resident and migrant game, most of them amount to adaptations of the Williamston Plan.

In 1961, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission initiated a public dove field program on five fields located in Bay, Franklin, Hillsborough and Wakulla counties. Each year the program has continued to gain popularity and support from sportsmen. Fields located on both public and private land, usually near big cities, are made available through cooperative lease agreements between the Commission and landowners. The size of each field is dependent on many variables, but most range from 125 to 500 acres. The Game Management staff selects and plants the fields. A daily fee of \$2.00 per hunter is charged.

Except in the northern one-third of the state, little grain is grown. In portions of central and south Florida public dove fields sown with

brown top millet or other food grain attract significant concentrations of both local and migrant doves. Even in corn and small grain growing areas of northern Florida, grain and peanut fields are leased under the program to help fill hunting demand in certain localities.

Leased fields to be managed by the Commission are selected on a year-to-year basis. Available information relative to past dove concentrations, hunting demand, size, and distance from towns are considered before fields are negotiated. Grain fields which are planted for agricultural purposes by the farmer and leased by the Commission for public hunting are selected in certain areas.

After preliminary site selections are made, a lease, usually for one year, is entered if the farmer is favorable. Stipulations vary in each contract. One arrangement is for the farmer to plant grain according to the Commission's specifications and receive in return one-half of the gate receipts. Seed, fertilizer, and technical assistance, if necessary, are furnished by the Commission in this instance. Native vegetation is usually left in spots throughout the fields to provide hunting blinds and to help distribute hunters throughout the hunting area. Parking lots are also designated.

In grain farming regions some fields are leased, after the harvest, for fees ranging from one to two dollars per acre. Occasionally good dove fields are donated for regulated public hunting. Usually in this situation, a farm contractor is hired for land preparation and seeding either on a $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{3}$ permit sales share or bid contract basis. Each field and its related acquisition and development involves variables that are negotiated in individual cases.

Primary development expenses include fertilizer, dolomite, seed, land rental or permit receipt share, employee travel expenses, equipment operation, labor, and signs and printed materials. Fertilizer, the major item, often accounts for 50% of the total expense.

Following planting operations, the fields and border zones are posted with Wildlife Management Area signs. Entrance signs are erected and directory signs are placed along major public roads leading to the field. A gate station is established for sale of permits and distribution of informational brochures, as well as for collection of harvest data. Regulations and other information are made available to the public through news media.

By opening day, the operation, enforcement and administration activities are carried out by combined efforts of all Commission divisions representing each of five administrative regions. The Regional Manager is responsible for permit sales, enforcement and personnel duty assignments.

The dove season usually extends from the first part of October through early January. It is usually divided into three phases so that each sportsman may take advantage of periods of dove concentrations in his particular area (Aldrich 1952, and Winston 1954). Planting dates are planned so that seed maturation coincides with anticipated migration flights to produce optimum dove concentrations during one or more of the phases of the season. Each field is normally open twice weekly, at least one open day being Saturday or Sunday. After the season all leases are canceled and signs removed.

Results of the initial attempt were disappointing and emphasized the need for detailed planning. The lack of publicity contributed much to the program's misfortune.

In 1962, the program was enlarged to include 10 fields throughout the estate. In spite of a reduced permit fee from \$3.00, in 1961, to \$2.00, in 1962, the program was almost financially self-supporting from the sale of permits alone. Most fields were considered successful in terms of hunter use and harvest. A field in Dade County (Miami) provided 11,289 doves for approximately 2,400 hunters for a seasonal average of 4.8 doves per hunter.

Based on the success of the 1962 season, the experimental program was considered worth while as a yearly endeavor. In 1963, 19 fields were added for a total of 27 in 18 counties. More than 6,424 hunters visited the fields and the season's harvest was approximately 4.8 birds per hunter per day. The quickly arranged enlargement of the program resulted in a reduction in hunter use compared to the previous

year. The lower permit sales were partly due to the establishment of several fields remote from large human populations.

After most unsuccessful fields were eliminated, eighteen fields remained in 1964. They were mostly strategically located throughout the state on the basis of previous years' experiences. During the season approximately 8,413 hunters bought permits. An additional estimated 12% of the total hunters were at least 65 years old and were not required by law to buy permits. A total of 9,560 hunters harvested 32,838 doves resulting in an average of 3.4 doves per hunter per day in 1964.

The 1964 season was highly successful. It had provided a good amount of outdoor recreation on an equitable, self-sustaining basis. According to a dove field survey conducted by the Commission, 15% of the public dove field hunters in Dade County (Miami) bought a hunting license only to hunt on public dove fields. This amounted to \$2,248.00 license sales increase attributable to the fields. The return from increased license sales plus one-half of the sale of 2,709 permits resulted in a receipt of \$3,602.50 from license and permits. The other one-half of permit sales was paid to the field development contractor. The total expense involved in the four Dade County fields was \$4,109.80 for a total loss of \$507.30. The operation was carried out on a nearly break-even basis.

Dade County probably exemplifies the maximum benefits which can be expected from the dove field program, because of its human population density and limited hunting opportunities. However, when increased license and permit sales are considered along with the results from the total recreational use afforded by this program, it is economically self-sustaining with a magnificent amount of hunting recreation when compared to other hunting programs.

This year (1965) 22 fields have been provided in 11 counties, and several other small fields have been planned on a national forest and a military reservation in three other counties. So far this year the program has been most successful, thanks to increased knowledge in management and past experience in selecting attractive areas for doves near concentrations of hunters. Harvest and hunter utilization on fields for the first week of the season which started October 2, have broken all previous records.

Table 1.—Yearly Comparisons In Florida's Dove Field Program.

Year	Fields	Hunters ³	Harvest	Doves per Hunter	Expense ¹	Receipts	Profit ¹ or Loss
1961	5	684	2,864	4.1	\$ 7,964.77	\$ 1,797.00	\$- 6,167.77
1962	10	4,529	14,993	3.3	7,536.00	7,060.00	- 476.00
1963	27	6,424	30,870	4.8	20,707.00	11,339.00	- 9,368.00
1964	18	9,560	32,838	3.4	15,127.37	15,468.10	+ 340.73
TOTAL	60⁴	21,197	81,565	3.9²	\$51,335.14	\$35,664.10	\$-15,671.04¹

¹ Not including salaries of permanent personnel, office support, publicity expenses, etc.

² 4.6 trips per hunter/season according to mail survey in Dade County.

³ Approximately 12 per cent of hunters were average exempted from buying a permit.

⁴ Each field was operated an average of 10 days/season.

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