

By

## FIELD MANAGEMENT FOR PUBLIC DOVE HUNTING IN THE UNITED STATES\*

ROBERT B. McCARTNEY

*Game Division, Virginia Commission of Game & Inland Fisheries*

Charlottesville, Virginia

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years most states with an open season on mourning doves have experienced a steady increase in the popularity of dove hunting. The abundance of doves and the availability of hunting areas has, however, varied widely throughout the United States. Most states provide public hunting areas of some sort and dove management potential varies from none to excellent with the area. While most public hunting areas have limited potential for dove hunting, many have been greatly improved through management and provide excellent dove hunting over fields managed for that purpose. Because dove concentrations are found primarily on agricultural lands, particularly harvested croplands, most dove hunting has been and will continue to be on privately owned lands. In some areas state leasing of the dove hunting rights and daily fee hunting have resulted in many choice privately owned areas open to public dove hunting.

In order to determine the extent to which the various states are providing areas for public dove hunting and to assemble information on techniques being used, a questionnaire was sent to 31 states which had an open season on mourning doves during 1963. Replies were received from all states except Illinois. Connecticut disclosed that their season had been abolished by legislative action.

### PUBLIC DOVE HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES

Nine states, Arizona, California, Colorado, Maryland, Oregon,, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah reported that they do not have managed public dove hunting areas. Oregon indicated that dove hunting was not now "of major interest" to their sportsmen, but the need for more intensive management in the future was anticipated. Utah reported that dove distribution and hunting had been improved in some areas by development of "guzzlers" or catchment basins to provide watering areas. Such developments specifically for dove are being considered. Arizona reported that a public small-game hunting area was under development with management plans as yet incomplete. Heavy dove hunting pressure is expected to develop on this area.

Idaho and West Virginia reported that crops planted on public hunting areas often attract doves and provide some shooting although they are planted primarily for other wildlife species. The early fall departure of doves from Idaho and the very late (Mid-October) opening date in West Virginia limit dove hunting possibilities in both states.

Eighteen states reported that public dove field management of one type or another was being practiced by the state wildlife agency. The extent of involvement in this type of management varied widely among the states. Seventeen states reported that public dove fields were

---

\*Prepared for the S. E. Dove Technical Committee Panel Session at the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Southeastern Association of Game and Fish Commissioners, Clearwater, Florida, October 19 to October 21, 1964.

located on lands owned by the state wildlife agency. Twelve states reported that fields were located on lands owned by cooperating agencies. Fields under lease from private landowners were reported by six states. States involved and types of areas managed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Public dove hunting field management by state and land class.

State	LAND OWNERSHIP CLASSIFICATION		Leased Private
	State Wildlife Agency	Cooperating Agency	
Alabama	X	X	
Arkansas	X	X	
Delaware	X		
Florida	X	X	X
Georgia	X	X	
Kansas	X	X	
Kentucky	X	X	X
Louisiana	X	X	X
Mississippi	X	X	
Missouri	X	X	
North Carolina			X
Oklahoma	X	X	
Pennsylvania	X		
Rhode Island	X		
South Carolina	X	X	X
Tennessee	X	X	
Virginia	X	X	
Washington	X	X	?

Only Washington reported having bought areas (2) primarily to provide public dove shooting. Six states reported having leased areas primarily to provide public dove hunting. These include Florida (28 areas), Kentucky (1 area), North Carolina (19 areas), South Carolina (20 areas), Tennessee (1 area), and Washington (2 areas).

In recent years a few enterprising farmers have sold the dove hunting rights on their farms to groups of sportsmen for the season or to individual hunters by the day. Certain farms, particularly large dairy farms, attract great concentrations of doves annually. These farms often become traditional dove hunting areas and dove hunting is a product which some farmers are learning can be sold. As daily fee operations provide public hunting a number of states are seeking to encourage it. Of the states replying to the questionnaire, 12 reported that at least a few such areas were being or had been tried. These included: Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The most successful daily fee dove hunting areas would be expected near the larger metropolitan areas. While in most cases the dove on these farms are attracted to fields planted and harvested as a part of the normal farm operation, some farmers in Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee have planted or managed certain fields specifically for dove shooting. As on state areas most farms limit hunting to certain days each week.

### DOVE FIELD MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Techniques of dove field management vary and are still in the experimental stage in most states. Basically the goal is to provide good dove shooting over a sustained period. Methods include production of foods attractive to doves and regulation of hunting pressure. Supplying the foods attractive to doves must of course be done in accordance with regulations which prohibit baiting. A crop of seed producing plants

may be grown and left standing or the crop may be harvested in a normal fashion i.e. a valid agricultural practice. A normal harvest may be completed only after several operations thus prolonging the conditions attractive to doves.

The variety of crops planted is influenced by region, climate, soil, labor requirements, and of course attractiveness to doves. In several states crops are grown on public lands by local farmers who harvest them on a share basis. In other cases state employees prepare and tend fields managed for dove hunting. The most popular dove field crops are the various millets including brown-top, German, Japanese, Proso, and others. Normally millet planted to attract doves is left as a standing crop. Washington however, reported shooting over harvested millet fields and Virginia is experimenting with German millet and soybeans grown together and cut for hay. As doves favor areas of relatively bare ground for feeding many states have found that millet planted in dove fields is most effective when planted in rows or narrow strips with relatively wide intervening areas cultivated and kept free of vegetation.

Corn was reported as being used in nine states including Idaho and West Virginia where it is not grown primarily for doves. Corn is most commonly picked or cut for ensilage with a portion left standing as shooting cover and food for wildlife during the winter months. Six states (including Idaho) reported that wheat was one of the crops planted. Wheat stubble fields are usually very attractive to doves. Other crops being used include Buckwheat (3 states), Grain Sorghum (2 states), Soybeans (1 state), and Field Peas (1 state). In some cases a "game bird mixture" containing seeds of all the above plants may be sown. Rhode Island, the only New England state with a dove season, reported that weed fields were used. Certain weed seeds are heavily utilized by doves and management directed at encouragement of the favored species might have great value.

As good dove fields can be over-shot by frequent and heavy hunting, many states have found it necessary to regulate the harvest on fields open to public hunting. A most common practice has been to limit shooting to certain days each week. Shooting days are limited on public dove fields in nine states. Wednesdays and Saturdays are frequently chosen as "open" days. Three states (Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee) charge a daily fee to hunt on at least some of their managed areas. Some states require daily or seasonal permits or limit hunting pressure on certain areas through a quota system. Some lightly hunted areas are open without special regulation. This could probably apply to most areas late in the season.

Further increases in dove hunting pressure and popularity can be expected in the future and with it will come more intensive dove field management on both public and private lands.

---