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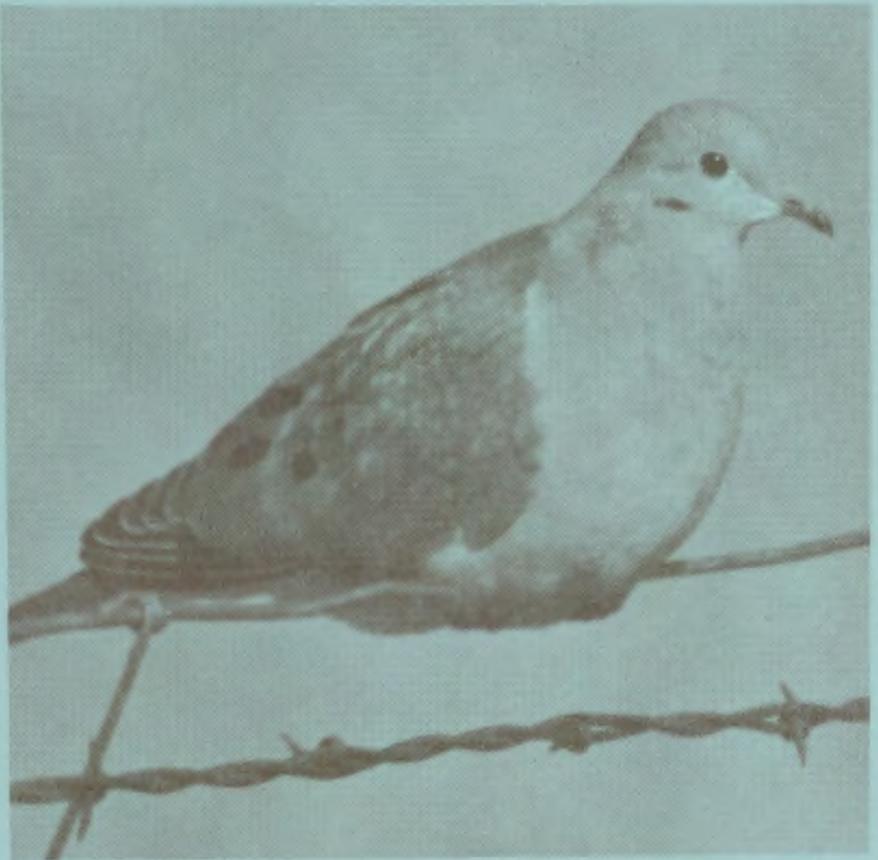
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Mourning Dove Facts



Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
U. S. Department of Agriculture
in cooperation with
South Dakota Department
of Game, Fish and Parks

Mourning Dove Facts

By John L. Schmidt, Extension Wildlife Specialist

The mourning dove and its status as a game bird has been the subject of much debate in South Dakota. The concern centers around fear that, because of hunting, the mourning dove may become rare or extinct.

Mourning doves are currently hunted in 31 of the contiguous 48 states. Although mourning doves have been added to the list of game species in South Dakota relatively recently, doves have been a popular game bird in some states longer than South Dakotans have hunted pheasants.

The mourning dove is a familiar bird to most South Dakotans. Their small head, streamlined bodies and pointed tails are as distinctive as their mournful call.

Distribution and Abundance

Mourning doves are a unique gamebird as they nest in all 48 contiguous states. In South Dakota they are common in all counties. Doves are a migratory species and concentrate during the winter in the Southern states and in Mexico.

Like all wildlife species, the mourning dove population is dependent primarily upon its habitat. If adequate food, cover and water are available, the population will be high. If some habitat requirement is in short supply, the population will suffer.

Conditions for the mourning dove in South Dakota are excellent. They have benefited from white man's activities. White men replaced the native grasses of South Dakota with grain crops and annual weeds. Being primarily a seed eater, the dove prospered. The establishment of many shelterbelts and other tree plantings likewise benefited the dove because they nest primarily in trees.

The bird's compatibility with man and environmental changes that man has created have been responsible for the high population of doves that we now have. It is estimated that the dove is more abundant now than when white man first settled on this continent.

Ecology

Food Habits

Many studies have been conducted on the food habits of mourning doves and all agree that the bird is a strict vegetarian. Seeds virtually make up their entire diet. Agricultural crops, such as wheat and

corn, and associated weeds, such as foxtail, are important foods. Seeds of agricultural crops consumed are mainly waste grain that was not harvested. It should be pointed out that doves do not control weeds any more than they control wheat or corn. Plants produce such an abundance of seeds that it is virtually impossible to control them through seed consumption.

One study conducted in southwestern Iowa found wild hemp, or marijuana, to be the most important food of doves.

Reproduction and Mortality

Mourning doves have rather high rates of both reproduction and mortality. They normally lay 2 eggs per clutch and they produce several broods each year. In the South, where the growing season is longer, a single pair of birds may produce five or six broods each year. In South Dakota two to four broods per year are more common.

This high rate of reproduction is made possible by the dove's short incubation period and rapid development of the squabs, the young birds. Incubation requires only 14 days; most game birds require 21 to 28 days. After hatching, the young doves are able to fend for themselves at 12-14 days of age which allows their parents to start another brood. The entire cycle of nest building, egg laying, incubation, and rearing of the young requires about a month. Both male and female assist in the incubation and rearing of the young.

There are several mortality factors which keep the mourning dove population at a fairly stable level. Weather, parasites, disease, and predators are the primary mortality factors.

Habitat

Although doves occasionally nest on the ground, their primary nest site is in trees. They also use trees for roosting and loafing. Extensive rural shelterbelt and urban tree planting programs in South Dakota have been an important factor in the current high population of mourning doves.

Feeding areas include stubble fields, roadsides and any other area where preferred seeds are common. Doves depend heavily upon water and will seek it out several times each day. Numerous farm pond developments have been beneficial to doves.

Effects of Hunting

Hunting, one aspect of dove management, has been researched by scientists in several parts of the country. Results of studies conducted in South Dakota were similar to those of other states: **hunting has had no detrimental effect on the mourning dove population.**

Over 44,000 doves have been banded in South Dakota since 1917 to gain information on their migration and mortality. Data from these bandings were analyzed by personnel of the South Dakota Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at South Dakota State University. Results showed that the average annual death rate from all mortality factors was over 50%.

Prior to the initiation of a dove hunting season in South Dakota in 1967, the average annual mortality rate due to hunting was 5%. These banded doves were harvested in areas south of South Dakota, from Arizona to Kansas to Georgia and even to Mexico and Central America. Since 1967 and the initiation of a dove hunting season in South Dakota, the total mortality rate due to hunting increased to only 8%.

The vast majority, approximately 90%, of mortality of doves is caused by natural factors such as parasites, disease, weather and predators.

The harvest of doves through a carefully regulated hunting season can be likened to the harvest of wheat. If left unharvested, most of the wheat would simply be wasted. The same principle holds for doves; if left unharvested, the surplus would die anyway of other causes.

Hunting seasons on mourning doves are carefully monitored and regulated so that only surplus birds are harvested. Surveys are conducted in all 48 contiguous states by qualified personnel to assure good management.

Since a mourning dove season was opened in 1967 in South Dakota, the number of doves has increased. See Figure 1.

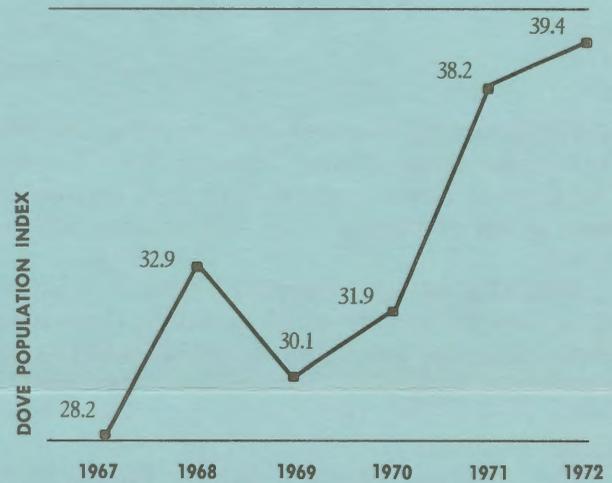


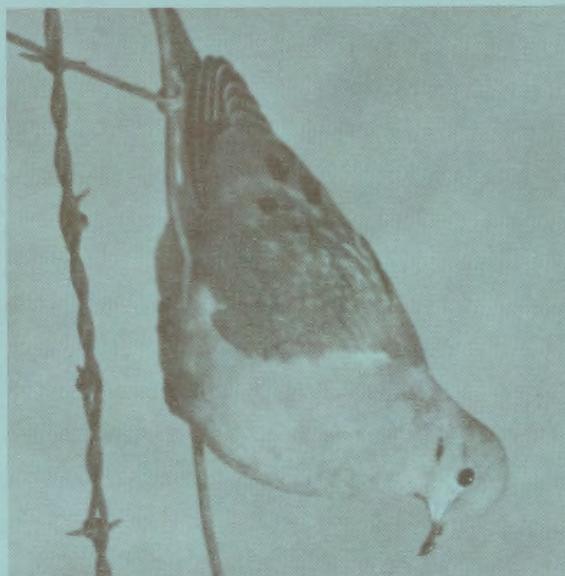
Figure 1. Index of South Dakota's mourning dove population after the initiation of a hunting season in 1967. (Mourning Dove Breeding Population Status Report.)

There is no evidence to support the fear that the mourning dove become rare or extinct because of hunting. The true danger to the dove and other wildlife species is the loss and degradation of its food, water and cover from pollution and other man-caused environmental abuses. The harvest of surplus doves as regulated by professional biologists, based on research data and extensive surveys, poses no threat to the mourning dove.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Duane C. Acker, Director of Extension, South Dakota State University, Brookings.

3M-8-72-File: 9.2-4421

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