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Doves Plentiful, Fields Spotty For Opening Day

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From Jim Low - The Missouri Department of Conservation

Weather has favored reproduction, but finding a good hunting spot will take legwork.

JEFFERSON CITY—Visit dove fields before opening day, and buy plenty of ammunition. That's the advice from Missouri's top dove expert. Resource Scientist John Schulz says Missouri doves have raised a bumper crop of young this year.


Missouri's dove hunting season runs from Sept. 1 through Nov. 9. Mourning, collared and white-winged doves all are legal. The limit is 15 doves of all three species in the aggregate daily and 30 in possession.

Missouri residents ages 16 through 64 must buy a Small Game Hunting Permit to pursue doves. All dove hunters 16 and older must have a Missouri Migratory Bird Hunting Permit for dove hunting.

Mourning doves are amazingly prolific, raising up to six clutches of eggs between March and September. However, doves build flimsy, shallow nests, and rainy, windy weather reduces nest success. Schulz says this year's hot, dry summer has been good for dove nesting. The evidence comes from the Missouri Department of Conservation's dove-banding program.

“Of the 500 or so doves banded so far this year, almost 400 of them have been hatched this year,” said Schulz. “You only see proportions like that in years with excellent dove reproduction.”

Dry weather is a two-edged sword for dove hunters, however. Without adequate rainfall, food crops planted for doves at conservation areas don’t thrive. Wet weather early in the summer hampered efforts to plant sunflowers, wheat and millet on managed dove fields at conservation areas. Then the weather turned hot and dry over much of the state, preventing proper growth of dove food crops.

Some areas had the opposite problem  this year, with excessive water or outright flooding. Ten Mile Pond CA is the most notable example. Normally this area in Mississippi County provides excellent dove action. However, flooding made it impossible to plant any dove fields there this year.

The good news is that with approximately 150 fields on 90 conservation areas, some are bound to have food crops to attract doves. And since dry or wet weather has reduced the availability of natural foods, doves will be more concentrated than ever on dove fields that did well. That means lots of shooting for hunters who find the right spots.

Hunters can find managed dove fields **here**, or by calling any Conservation Department office. Since the condition of crops varies dramatically, scouting before opening day is important for success.

“Nothing beats an on-site inspection,” said Schulz. “Hunters who put in the time necessary to find a field with good crop development get the best hunting.”

Schulz said scouting is best done in the days immediately before Sept. 1. This is because final field preparation, including disking crops to make them accessible to doves, often is done just before the season opener.

“If you go on Aug. 23, you might only see standing crops and no birds,” said Schulz. “A few days later, strips will be disked through the field, and birds will be finding the new food source.”

If you can’t get to your preferred area before Sept. 1, Schulz suggests calling the area manager and asking about conditions. Contact information for area managers is available through the Conservation Atlas database at **mdc.mo.gov/atlas**.

If you prefer not to join dozens of other hunters on managed dove fields, other options exist. Doves like open ground, weed seeds, perching sites and water. Any spot that combines two or more of these elements can be an excellent hunting spot. A pond with a wide margin of bare soil or mud – easy to find in this droughty year – is one possibility. Add some dead trees for perching, and you have a dove magnet.

The Conservation Department bands 2,000 to 3,000 birds annually as part of a nationwide effort to create a dove-management database. Approximately 12 percent of those doves are recovered and reported, mostly by hunters. Schulz said the most important thing dove hunters can do to improve their sport is to check every bird they shoot for a leg band and report any they find at **www.reportband.gov**, or by calling 800-327-BAND (2263).

“Data from band recoveries drive a wide array of analytical processes that directly affect how we establish mourning dove hunting regulations each year,” said Schulz. “By reporting band numbers, hunters are helping manage our dove resource for future generations.”

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Statistics from conservation areas where the Conservation Department records the number of doves killed and the number of shots fired show that hunters fire an average of five shots per dove. If you kill a limit of 15 doves with fewer than three boxes of shotgun shells, pat yourself on the back for being an above-average wingshot. Then pick up all the empty hulls on the ground around you. Leaving them in the field is littering, and could earn you a ticket.

Dove hunters must use nontoxic shot when hunting doves or other game on 21 conservation areas with sizeable wetlands and waterfowl populations. Those areas and other details of dove hunting regulations are found in the 2011 Migratory Bird Hunting Digest, available wherever hunting permits are sold or at **mdc.mo.gov/8927**

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