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Songbirds

of Missouri Mourning Dove

Mourning doves belong to the bird family Columbidae, a group which includes most species of pigeons and doves. Members of this family are known to be plump, fast-flying birds with small heads and low, cooing voices.



Ask someone what the most-hunted bird in the United States is and the answer you'll probably get is wild turkeys, ducks or Canada geese. Those are all good guesses, but they miss the mark. Besides being a well-liked backyard bird, mourning doves are the most popular gamebird in the country. Each year, hunters kill approximately 70 million of them. That sounds like a lot, but it represents only a small portion -- about 15 percent -- of the 450 million mourning doves that populate North America.

Several factors have played a role in the current abundance of mourning doves, and one of them is the bird's reproductive abilities. During the breeding season in spring, summer and early fall, the mourning dove nests an average of five times. That is considerably more than the one or two nestings we see with other songbirds.

Another factor in the large mourning dove population is America's ever-increasing interest in bird feeding. Mourning doves prefer feeding on the ground and can frequently be found eating seeds that have fallen from hanging feeders. Cracked corn, sunflower

seeds and other bird feed spread on a platform-type feeder is a popular method of attracting mourning doves to backyards.

But biologists believe the primary reason for the large mourning dove population is that humans have increased the habitat for this bird over the past few centuries. In the days of early settlement, records indicate that mourning doves were present, but not abundant. That changed, however, as pioneers settled the land.

By clearing the forests, introducing new grain crops, and creating plenty of livestock ponds in the arid regions of the West and Southwest, pioneers created conditions in which the mourning dove could thrive. That, combined with the bird's reproductive abilities, ensured their population would continue to grow.

The mourning dove is a medium-sized grayish-brown bird with rounded head and white-tipped tail feathers. The mating coos of the males can be heard in mid-spring and will continue for most of the summer. Following courtship, males select the nest sites and mated pairs begin construction.

Dove nests are flimsy and far from safe for either eggs or nestlings. Often, a nest consists of no more than several twigs laid across each other on supportive tree branches. Doves sometimes borrow other birds' nests, and in areas dominated by grasslands, they will nest on the ground. The average clutch size is two eggs, which hatch in 14 days.

Male doves actively participate in the nesting process. They chase away rival mates, assist in egg incubation and help feed the nestlings.

Young doves grow rapidly and leave the nest 10-14 days after hatching. Once a parental pair completes its first nesting, they start on the next.

For more information about mourning doves or dove hunting, contact your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4)

Be a Bird Watcher!

Look...

Mourning doves can be seen year-round in Missouri and are abundant in both rural and urban areas. In urban areas, they can be found in a variety of settings, such as backyards, parks, parking lots and other places where they might find food.

In rural areas they prefer to hang out in farm fields, open woods, scrub brush areas, roadsides and grasslands. One of the key ingredients of rural habitat is the presence of a farm pond, stream or other water source.

...and Listen

Mourning doves are well-known for the "mournful" cooing that gives them their name. This call is something like "Oooo-OOH-Oooo-Oooo-Oooo." This call is usually issued by the males, although on occasion, females will issue a lesser version of this call.

