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Photos Available from Biological Survey.

MOURNING DOVES DON'T TRAVEL FAR
OR FAST, MIGRATION STUDIES SHOW

Mourning doves, among the more popular game birds of the southern States, contrary to prevailing opinion do not travel more than 20 miles a day during migration or at a rate of speed exceeding 35 miles an hour, it was recently shown by migration studies made by the Alabama Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit. The unit is sponsored by the American Wildlife Institute, the Alabama Department of Conservation, the Alabama Polytechnic Institute and the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of the Interior.

Since 1936, members of the research unit, which is headed by Dr. Allen M. Pearson, have banded more than 2,400 mourning doves in their efforts to study the bird's flight habits. The popular misconception that doves travel far and fast is probably due, it was said, to the fact that when hunted the birds fly with amazing speed. During migration, however, the doves do not exert themselves.

Like most other migratory birds in North America, mourning doves travel northward in spring and return southward in fall. The Alabama research unit noted that the migratory tendency apparently is present in doves before they reach complete maturity. Nestlings that were banded in Lee County, Alabama, in summer were retaken near Thomasville, Georgia, and Dothan, Alabama, in December of the same year.

Interest in the status and habits of the mourning dove has been intensified during the past few years because the dove is a popular game bird. A few years ago, many individuals became alarmed when it was discovered that doves were hunted during the latter part of the breeding season. Some observers ventured the opinion that unless measures were taken to protect the birds, the doves might suffer the same fate as the now extinct passenger pigeon, to which the mourning dove is related.

The Alabama research unit sponsored the migration and other studies which showed that the resident birds, those that remain in Alabama and nearby States to nest, actually were on the down-grade and were being depleted by hunters. As a result of these investigations, the Biological Survey last year recommended that the hunting season in certain areas of the South be opened 2 weeks later than previously so as to give the birds time to complete the nesting season undisturbed. The birds were still on the nests in September, investigators found.

The regulations were changed as a conservation measure to help build up the breeding stock in the South. Some further changes may still be necessary, it was indicated, to give the dove additional protection. Whether the 1940 regulations will include such alterations in the dove hunting season, however, will not be determined until Biological Survey migration and nesting investigators make their final reports on the results of recent studies.

(EDITORS: THE FOLLOWING IS A MORE DETAILED ACCOUNT OF THE MOURNING DOVE FOR THOSE WHO WISH A LONGER STORY)

Since the Biological Survey began banding migratory birds in 1920, more than 27,000 mourning doves have been banded. Among the principal banders of this species are Dr. Allen M. Pearson, leader of the Alabama Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit; W. W. Demeritt, of Key West, Florida; W. B. Taber, Jr., of Kansas, Illinois; Oliver L. Austin, of Cape Cod, Massachusetts; and Carlos M. Stannard, of Phoenix, Arizona. Of some 21,700 mourning doves banded up to 1938, the Biological Survey has return records of 1,500.

In migration, the records indicate, the mourning doves use the four major North American flyways--the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific. The majority of the birds usually stay in the flyway in which they are reared. Most doves leave the southern States in spring and may migrate as far north as southern Canada.

Mourning doves belong to the family Columbidae, which includes 21 species and subspecies of birds of the United States, among them such game birds as the white-winged dove, band-tailed pigeon, and the extinct passenger pigeon.

Commonly called the turtle dove, the mourning dove is a pigeon-like bird about a foot long, with a rather slender neck and a long, pointed tail. Generally its plumage is brownish gray, bluish gray, or purplish gray. It is difficult to distinguish the male from the female on sight. Amateurs sometimes mistake the eastern ground dove of the southern States for the mourning dove, but the ground dove can be recognized by its stumpy tail, a flash of bright color under the wing, and its smaller size.

In the East the mourning dove usually lives in more or less open country and apparently is not fond of the deep woods. In the West it lives both on plains and mountains and is seen at altitudes ranging from sea level to 7,000 feet. It is commonly seen in trees and bushes, but does practically all of its feeding on the ground.

The food of the mourning dove is almost all vegetable, but the specie does little harm to domestic crops, according to Biological Survey investigators. Though fond of buckwheat, rye, wheat, and corn, the dove usually gets only waste grains. Economically, it is a beneficial bird because it consumes large quantities of weed seeds at all seasons of the year. Investigators have found as many as 9,100 weed seeds in a single stomach. The bird also eats other seeds, berries, small acorns, and beechnuts.

The mourning dove's method of feeding the young has aroused considerable popular interest. The nestlings are fed a milk-like substance composed of partially digested seeds and a secretion of the bird's crop that is regurgitated by both the male and female. This habit, shared by all pigeons and doves, gave rise to the expression "pigeon's milk."

The breeding season is long. In the Middle States mourning doves can be seen nesting from early in May through August and, rarely, to early September. It is quite common for doves to rear two broods a year. The mating season is preceded by the male's attempt to win the female.

In courtship, the male will fly to a height of 100 feet or more and then glide earthward in one or more sweeping curves to alight within a few feet of the female. This may be repeated several times at intervals of 2 or 3 minutes. On the ground, the male often struts about with nodding head and wings spread

in a graceful manner. Sometimes he perches in front of the female and puffs out his feathers as though calling attention to himself. The intrusion of another male upon the scene often results in a fight, whereupon the female disappears.

Once mated, the pair remain together through the breeding season. The pair is affectionate and often utters the "coo, coo" sound commonly associated with these birds. The male invariably stands still when he coos, even in courtship. The female seldom coos, and then not so loudly as the male. Although mourning doves spend a large part of the year in flocks, in spring they scatter in pairs over the country to nest. Some scientists believe that the present status of the bird, and perhaps even its existence, is due to this habit of scattering. If the dove bred in colonies, as the passenger pigeon did, it probably would have been subjected to the same wholesale slaughter that exterminated that bird.

Nests are usually placed in low trees and bushes, though sometimes they may be on the ground or in a tree cavity. Ordinarily, the nest is not more than 20 feet above the ground and is made of sticks and lined with finer twigs. The female lays a set of two pure white eggs at least twice a season, and three and four sets a year are not uncommon. Both the male and female take turns sitting on the eggs or caring for the young, the male more often sitting from about 8 in the morning until 5 at night and the female throughout the night.

Within 13 days, the eggs are hatched. The nestlings are helpless at birth and remain in the nest for 2 weeks. When frightened from the nest at this time, the female often drops to the ground and attempts to lure the intruder away from the young by feigning injury. The young squab is fat, unattractive, and covered

with short, white down through which the yellowish skin shows. During the first 2 weeks, the young are fed by regurgitation, but gradually solid foods like those of the adults are substituted.

Within a month, the nestlings can care for themselves, and by July begin to assume the gregarious habits of the species. Common roosting sites are selected, and many hundreds of doves often come to a single place at night. During the summer season, it is not uncommon at sunset to see entire flocks of mourning doves going to water to drink.

The mourning dove is among the more popular game birds throughout the southern United States. It is sought by hunters both for food and sport. When alarmed, the bird leaves the ground very quickly, gaining speed rapidly with strong, sweeping wing beats. As it flies, its wings make a whistling sound that suggests the winnowing flight of the goldeneye duck.

While doves are found in many parts of the United States, the major hunting areas are in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. Being migratory game birds, mourning doves come within the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Biological Survey, which annually recommends hunting regulations on the basis of studies conducted during the previous summer and spring.

In the past the hunting regulations have varied with conditions prevailing in different areas. Each area may have a different season but the seasons in recent years have been held between September 1 and January 31. Of the arrests

made for violations of mourning dove regulations, the greatest number in recent years have been made for hunting over bait. In 1931, an antibaiting regulation went into effect and has been continued each year since then. Other important violations involve hunters who shoot doves before or after the open season or after sundown.

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