

THE FASTEST GUN IN THE EAST

By
Jack Randolph

My son was just a little fella, too young to shoulder a shotgun, but old enough to enjoy going huntin' with his dad. When I think of dove hunting, I always first think of the afternoon in the Prince George cornfield where I was seeking to bag my twelfth dove, which would fill my limit.

Johnny was about six years old, and he was sitting under a nearby bush counting and recounting my doves. About that time Garland Foster, the local state game warden, came across the field, and we commenced to exchange the pleasantries of the day. Bye and bye, as game wardens are prone to do, he asked how many doves I had bagged.

I called over to Johnny, asking, "How many birds do we have, John?"

Johnny made a big deal of counting them, and after careful deliberation he announced, "Fifteen, Dad."

"John," I said, "let Mr. Foster help you with that count," hoping against hope that I hadn't miscounted or that John hadn't picked up an extra dove or two while doing a good job acting as my retriever. Fortunately, the count proved to be eleven, and Foster and I parted friends.

But this all shows to go ya that you can get into trouble on a dove field if you're not careful.

One of the more serious and, unfortunately, most common violations in a dove field is illegal baiting. Illegal baiting is usually the result of an over-zealous host trying to provide a good shoot for his guests. As often as not such efforts result in great embarrassment and heavy fines for all concerned. Keep in mind that doves are migratory birds that are mainly under federal jurisdiction, and baiting them is a federal violation.

If you are invited to participate in a dove hunt, you are well advised to arrive early so that you can check things out. Go into the field without your gun and look around. If you see grain broadcast on the field or if you see grain that doesn't belong, such as corn in a wheat field or wheat in a cornfield, run - do not walk - to the nearest exit.

Don't underestimate the efficiency of law enforcement officers. They are very adept at spotting baited fields. Often an unusual density of doves is the giveaway.

As I write this, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has not set the dove seasons for 2004-05. The seasons are set within frameworks provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. For the past several years the Board of the Game Department has divided the dove season into three segments. The first segment opens near the first of September and closes a few weeks later. The second segment opens in late September and runs through October, and the final segment is usually from Christmas into early January.

The first segment of the dove season is the most popular by a long shot. Except for the squirrel and rail seasons, it is the only game in town. Shooting hours during this first segment start at noon, while the shooting commences a half hour before sunrise in the latter two segments,





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unless changed. The rationale for starting the first segment at noon, in this writer's opinion, is a little shaky.

Years ago the federal framework required that all dove hunting start at noon, but more recently this requirement has been lifted. The noon start for the first segment was continued because the Board members thought that farmers would be more apt to open their land to hunting if the shooting didn't start until midday. Inasmuch as the morning hours in September are much cooler, and landowners are entirely capable of scheduling their hunts on their own lands, I believe the half hour before sunrise hours should be consistent throughout.

Most hunters consider the best early dove hunting to be in cut cornfields. In dry years corn is apt to be cut early, and in wet years it will be cut later. Very lucky are the hunters who find early cut fields

before many cornfields are cut. The fewer fields that are cut, the more concentrated are the doves. As more fields are cut, the

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doves tend to spread out more. Cut corn is a good bet in the middle segment, but in the final segment some good shooting may be found in fallow fields near thick young pines where doves come to roost.

Usually wheat is harvested before the dove season opens, but if you simply like to see lots of doves, check out the harvested wheat fields in late August. I watch one such field near the Petersburg Federal Reformatory each year. Truthfully, I have never seen more doves anywhere than are on that field immediately after the wheat harvest. There is one wire that goes across the entire field, and if someone handed you a live dove and told you to find a place for it on that wire, you couldn't.

Dove hunting is a fun sport, but it can be dangerous, too. Dove shells, whether 12, 16 or 20 gauge are light loads. High brass shells or shot larger than 7 ½ has no place on a dove field. Heavier loads



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and heavier shot carry too far and may injure someone.

A cardinal rule on any dove field is **never shoot at a low-flying bird**. A low shot can easily put out the eye of some unsuspecting hunter. Hunters should always pick up their empty shells and take them out of the field. If a hunter shoots a bird, he is honor-bound to pick it up and keep it in his bag.

It is very difficult to find the perfect shooting station in a field. I don't like to be backed up to a high woods. My preference is to be far enough out in the field to permit shooting towards all points of the compass and then some. Occasionally, fields are so crowded that it is a real challenge to find a good spot. In such cases I try to get away from the crowd and hope

for the best. Sometimes it works. Other times you discover why that guy wrote about "Lonesome Dove."



Shooting at doves and shooting doves are two different things. If your wing-shooting is a little weak, spend some time popping clay birds thrown out of a hand trap. I consider the different angles possible with hand traps superior to shooting games in preparing for dove shooting. Be sure to follow the rules, especially your follow through. This is one sport in which the rules for good wingshooting really apply.

Also be sure that you can identify doves in flight. Shooting just about any other bird is a federal violation. I have seen guys kill ducks, hawks, blackbirds and others while hunting doves. There is simply no excuse for this. And, OK, don't forget to obtain your HIP numbers from the Game Department. You must have this number annotated on your hunting license

before you are a legal hunter.

While dove hunting is an institution in Virginia and throughout the South, it is a controversial topic in northern states where sportsmen are going toe-to-toe with anti-hunters as the hunters try to open dove seasons.

A study conducted in the 60's revealed that more doves are hunted and used by more hunters enjoying more hours of recreation than any other species of migratory game in the Southeastern United States.

Actually, about 70% of hatched doves die the first year, and the annual dove mortality, according to one study is 55%. Most doves die because of the weather, particularly violent storms. The annual kill by hunters amounts to about 3% of the entire dove population.

A pair of doves will nest six or seven times a year, bringing off one to four hatchlings each time. Two is about normal. They hatch in 12 to 14 days, and both sexes participate in the incubation. It takes about six weeks to produce a brood. The first young born in the early spring will have young of their own in late summer. A faint pink breast and blue-gray crown identifies the male dove. The female has a brownish breast.

There are actually three subspecies of mourning doves, of which two are found in the United States. It is accepted that the return of forested land early in the Twentieth Century hindered dove reproduction, but as mechanized farming became more widespread, more dove habitat was created.

The well equipped dove hunter, of course, has a shotgun. He may carry his shells in the pockets of his shooting stool, and he should probably carry cold water or soft drinks. Alcoholic beverages are not

permitted on most dove hunts, and shooting under the influence carries its own penalties. I like a sling on my shotgun because there is so much to carry into the field. I like a sling on my dove stool as well.

I recently read where a presidential candidate said that he likes cold roast doves. Never even heard of them. My preference is dove breasts cooked in a wok with stir-fry vegetables and teriyaki sauce. Serve this over rice and enjoy.

national publications, such as *Sports Afield* and *Outdoor Life* and in such newspapers as *The Baltimore Sunday Sun*, *Richmond News Leader*. He was the outdoor columnist for *The Stars & Stripes Pacific* and *The Army, Airforce, and Navy Times*. He is a frequent contributor to *Virginia Wildlife* and other publications. An accomplished photographer, Jack has traveled to Africa and Alaska several times. An avid outdoorsman, Jack also participates in fly tying, rod building, ammo reloading and other related hobbies. He resides in Colonial Heights, Virginia with his wife Chris.

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