

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*



Folk Name: Carolina Dove, Turtle Dove, Moaning Dove, Gray Bullet (coined by hunters)

Status: Resident

Abundance: Abundant

Habitat: Nest in small trees near open fields and open ground in both urban and rural areas

In the South, the plaintive call of the Mourning Dove was once well known to all.

“The coo of the Dove is the most mournful sound to be heard in our woods. It is a note of sorrow that cannot be listened to without inviting the sympathy of the listener.

The slowly drawn out ‘Coo-oo, coo, coo, coo!’ strikes upon the ear as if it were a voice in the air. It has neither distance nor direction.”

—A.C. Webb, *Our Bird Book*, 1917, adopted science text for North Carolina primary schools.

The first Mourning Dove calls of the year and their circling courtship flights were considered a herald of springtime:

“Sometime ago the doctor gave Mr. Smith [the mail carrier] three infallible signs of spring, viz: The cooing of the turtle doves, the appearance of the lizard and the crawling of the snake.”

—*The Gastonia Gazette*, March 8, 1910

“We heard the first Turtle Dove of the season on last Friday morning...Mercury ran close to Summer heat last Sunday...The sound of the automobile is now a common thing in this section.”

—*The Mountain Scout* (Taylorsville), March 29, 1916



Mourning Dove on bird bath. (Will Stuart)



Mourning Doves are one of our most abundant and widespread birds. These doves inhabit almost every open or semi-open part of our Piedmont landscape, though they are most common in our farm lands and suburbs. They are regular visitors to backyard bird feeders and are hard to miss on a day spent birding. These doves are remarkably adaptable birds that appear to have a high tolerance for human disturbance.

Mourning Doves are prolific breeders that can have up to five broods in one year. This adaptation helps the species to survive the great variety of perils individual birds face throughout their brief lives, including predation, disease, hunting, etc. It is estimated that a combined three-quarters of doves in North Carolina die each year. In addition to being prolific, they also have one of the longest nesting seasons of any species of bird in North America. Nesting has been documented almost every month of the year, but primarily occurs from March through October.

Most dove nests are built in live trees. Their nests are often derided as being poorly constructed as they are made up of a few loose twigs laid on a horizontal branch, often situated where they can be easily observed. Scientists noted that in the Piedmont, doves preferred to build nests in red cedar and short-leaf pine trees. However, the availability of these trees has declined dramatically over much of our area as the extent of old-field habitat has been reduced.

Doves have been known to build nests in some unusual places. In the late 1800s, R.B. McLaughlin of Statesville found one built on the old nest of a Green Heron and another built in an old woodpecker hole in a tree. He remarked of the nest placed in the tree: “This made a nice foundation upon which the nest was built. The site was all that was peculiar about it.” In March 2012, Lenore Greenwald found a Mourning Dove nesting in a flower pot on a small table on her porch at her home in Charlotte. However, perhaps the most unusual dove nesting report

we have on file is from January 1980, when a Mourning Dove got a very early start and built a nest on the window sill of the Charlotte City Manager's office.

On May 15, 1941, Charlotte high school student Jack Dermid filled out an official nest record card providing details about a Mourning Dove nest he discovered in town. The nest was built about 12 feet off the ground in the branches of an apple tree and had two white eggs. Just over a decade later, Jack Dermid became a prominent wildlife photographer whose photographs of Mourning Doves and their nests were published in several important popular and scientific works written about the status of the Mourning Dove in North Carolina and the Southeast.

In 1943, Elizabeth Clarkson reported two pairs of Mourning Doves "so tame they come to my side door every day" during the breeding season, but that year she was unable to find their nests. The following year, she reported doves "still in the nest in October in Mecklenburg County." That winter, she reported an unusually large number of doves spending the season near her watering pool. She speculated this was possibly due to the "scarcity of ammunition" due to the war, which had put a damper on local hunting.

David Wray, a biologist with the North Carolina State Museum, shared two stories of dove nests he observed in this region while traveling during World War II. On August 26, 1943, while visiting Hickory, he saw a dove move quickly away from a tree. He searched and soon found a nest hidden in a small willow oak tree nearby. It was situated about 6 feet off the ground and had two eggs inside. Wray reported a similar, but more dramatic occurrence the following year in Shelby. He described a "strange sight" he witnessed on August 20, 1944. He was walking with a group through a tree nursery when they "heard a loud fluttering among the branches just ahead of us, and saw a dove fluttering and apparently falling to the ground as if struck by a load of bird shot." The bird kept moving forward, always a few feet ahead of him, and it kept fluttering as he continued towards it, until they were about 200 feet away from the original spot. Then, the dove suddenly and miraculously recovered and flew

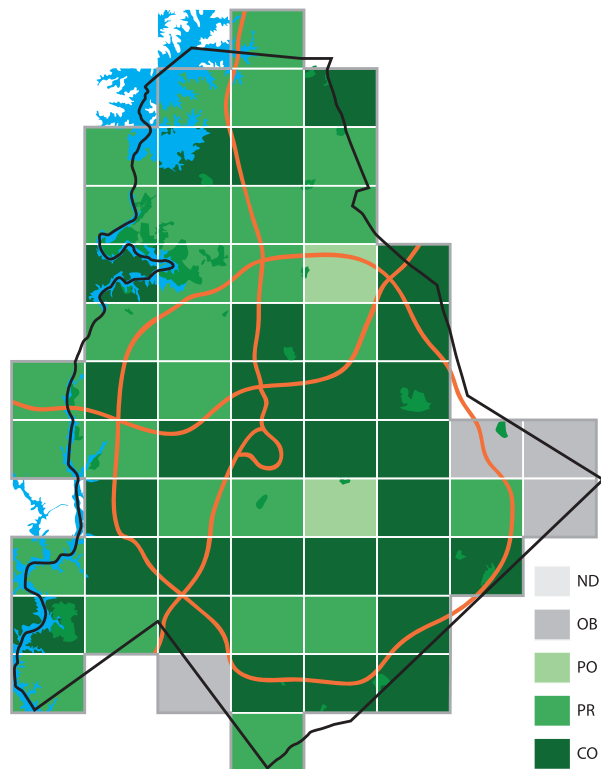


Mourning Dove with nesting material. (Jeff Lemons)

to the top of a large oak nearby. Wray recognized the effort as being a "distraction display," designed to lure a predator away from a nest. He returned to the original tree where he quickly discovered a dove nest with two half-grown squabs, about 6 feet off the ground in the fork of the sapling.

The Mourning Dove has always been one of the most popular game birds in the Carolinas. Since colonial times, a strong tradition of dove hunting has been passed down from father to son. At one point, the Mourning Dove was "the third most heavily-shot game bird in the country," and it may have surpassed that today. Dove populations have been heavily managed by state game agencies to benefit hunting, and the national population status is annually monitored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. For almost a century, farmers have been encouraged to plant fields of browntop millet and other grains and seeds preferred by doves. Since the 1940s, farms in Davidson, Mecklenburg, Catawba, Cleveland, Iredell, Gaston, and other Piedmont counties participated in dove management programs or were selected as state designated public dove hunting areas.

For a short period in the early 1950s, dove hunting became a hotly debated issue with birders coming down on both sides of the debate. Alexander Sprunt Jr., Thomas Quay (NCSU), and others supported the argument that "there is no good reason why these birds cannot so continue [as game birds] and be 'cropped' just as a



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/27, CO/29)

vegetative product.” The Mecklenburg Humane Society, the Mecklenburg Audubon Society, and other groups worked to sponsor a bill in the state legislature to designate the Mourning Dove as a species of “songbird,” instead of a game bird, to protect them from hunting. Ultimately, this legislative attempt was unsuccessful, and today the Mourning Dove remains an abundant and favorite quarry of hunters throughout both Carolinas.

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers documented Mourning Doves breeding in more survey blocks than any other species in Mecklenburg County. They are nearly ubiquitous throughout this rapidly developing county, but it is important to note that not all nests are successful. MCPRD staff studied four dove nests out of 534 nests followed in their nest success study. One nest failed and all hatchlings in the remaining three nests were killed by predators before fledging.