

The Facts about Mourning Dove Hunting in Minnesota

History of the Issue

In 1947, the Minnesota Legislature passed a bill to remove the Mourning Dove from the list of game birds and Governor Luther Youngdahl signed the bill into law. During the early 1980s, hunters tried numerous times to reinstate the Mourning Dove hunting season. These attempts failed, indicating that shooting doves is not the wish of the majority of Minnesota's citizens.

During the 2003-2004 legislative session, Minnesota lawmakers voted to allow a hunt on Mourning Doves for the first time in almost 60 years. Despite objections from citizens, biologists, and animal, bird, and environmental protection groups, Governor Tim Pawlenty signed the bill into law on May 18, 2004.



Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*)

Language for hunting the Mourning Dove was amended into the Game and Fish Omnibus Bill. Then, on the House floor, an amendment was offered to remove the dove hunt provision. It failed by a vote of 49 to 78. Senator Sandy Pappas offered a similar amendment on the Senate floor and two votes were taken. The first vote was 35 to 31 – a victory for the dove. The victory was short-lived because two senators, Claire Robling (R) and Gen Olson (R), changed their votes in favor of killing doves. A second vote was taken, with one Senator abstaining. Because the vote was a tie (33 to 33), the amendment did not pass.

Why Hunters Want to Shoot Doves

According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), "Dove hunting is a great opportunity for adults to introduce kids to hunting," said Ryan Bronson, DNR hunting recruitment and retention coordinator (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 25, 2004).

Hunting doves is about killing for fun. Adult doves weigh approximately 4 ounces and dress out to less than 2 ounces of meat – hardly enough to rationalize killing them for food. Because the dove hunting season starts in early September, it is a prelude to the regular hunting seasons. Simply put, it's about target practice, allowing recreational hunters to sharpen their skills.



Hunting Doves is Inherently Cruel

Studies have shown that over 20% of the doves shot may be crippled and not retrieved. Many protected avian species will be unavoidably and mistakenly shot – songbirds and small raptors such as American Kestrels, Sharp-shinned Hawks, and Merlins.

Doves are still tending their nests in early September and many fledglings will be orphaned. Over 10% of nesting and fledging occurs during the hunting season [Lincoln 1945, Geissler 1987].

Mourning Doves often mate for life. If one is killed, the breeding pair is lost. Sadly, surviving mates have been observed tending to their fallen mates.

Dove Hunting is Not Good Wildlife Management

No one has claimed that there is an overpopulation of Mourning Doves. The Minnesota DNR did not have to initiate a dove hunting season. Moreover, they shouldn't have, given the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) *Mourning Dove Population Status Report* of July 1, 2004. This report found significant declines in dove population over a 39-year period. In Minnesota, this report found that the dove population had a statistically significant and dramatic 46% decline from 2002 to 2003. The long-term population estimates are sometimes considered more reliable than short-term estimates; and the long-term (10- and 38-year) trends show a significant decline in Minnesota dove populations.

Doves are helpful to farmers because they feed on weed seeds and provide a welcome natural alternative to the chemical herbicides that are flooding our landscapes. Doves do not damage commercial crops. In Northern states such as Iowa and New York where doves are **not** hunted, no dove overpopulation problems have occurred.

Dove Hunting Causes Environmental Damage

The shooting of doves will increase lead discharge into our already threatened land and water resources. Dove hunters are allowed to use lead shot, as steel shot is more expensive and harder on gun barrels. It has been suggested that five to eight gunshot shells must be used for each dove "bagged."

Lead shot left lying on the ground can cause death not only to other doves, but also to birds that need to eat gravel. These birds will pick up the lead pellets and die from lead poisoning within a few days. Carrion eaters will ingest the lead from lead-poisoned carcasses. Wounded and unretrieved doves are easy prey for hawks, eagles, and other wildlife that will suffer the effects of lead poisoning.

Dove Hunting Has Other Undesirable Side Effects

Because doves often perch on power and phone lines, hunters will not be able to control the full spread pattern of shot. Hunters will use the lines as shooting sites. Repair costs, safety issues, loss of utility services, and increased liability are facts of the dove season.

There are Many Bird Species to Hunt in Minnesota

Minnesota already has many birds designated as game birds. Recreational hunters can shoot a wide variety of birds such as pheasants, geese, ducks, woodcock, and dozens of other bird species. The hunting seasons in Minnesota are longer and the bag limits are larger than ever for many species. Ample shooting opportunities exist for Minnesota recreational hunters – they don't need to hunt doves too.

Return Peace to the Mourning Dove

The Mourning Dove is far more valuable to Minnesota alive than dead. Doves are backyard birds, and many people enjoy their presence in their yards and at their bird feeders. The dove is the second most frequently reported bird at feeders in the U.S. [Barker and Tessaglia-Hymes 1999]. More than 2,566,000 Minnesota residents spent \$523,529,000 on feeding and watching songbirds in Minnesota [2001 Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife Associated Recreation].

People enjoy listening to the gentle cooing song of the dove. To most people, the idea of hunting Mourning Doves is the same as hunting Robins and Cardinals. There is a sad irony in the fact that these gentle and friendly birds are a historical symbol of peace and now have been reduced to mere hunting targets. There are no good reasons to abandon our state policy, which had been in effect for over 60 years. These cherished birds should have remained protected.