

A large field of sunflowers with bright yellow petals and dark brown centers, set against a clear blue sky. The sunflowers are in various stages of bloom, some fully open and others just starting to show their heads.

Dove Field MANAGEMENT

| Tim Teel, R.F., CWB, Westervelt Wildlife Services

Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*) are an abundant game bird that many hunters pursue each fall and winter. Doves have long been the center of many annual get-togethers, fund raisers, and the introduction of hunting to newcomers. There are some small towns in Alabama, such as Faunsdale, that thrive from the revenue associated with dove shoots. Historically areas with lots of row crop and open ground have a good number of doves throughout the year. With their erratic flight and speed they will challenge even the most seasoned wing shooter, making a complete mockery of them. For newcomers this can be somewhat frustrating. However, with a little planning there can be plenty of birds to keep them occupied and give them ample opportunity to work on their wing shooting. It is only spring but now is the time to start preparing for the September through January dove season if you have not already started. This is my favorite time of year because it has you thinking about everything that is going to take place in the fall; catching up with old friends, college football season, hopefully some relief from the heat, and opening day of dove season!

A small field with strips of sunflowers, a disked strip, soybeans, and corn.

Photo by Tim Teel



Where and What to Plant:

Dove field size recommendation varies from 5-20 acres. A small field with a great location will enable you to have more success than a larger field in a poor location. Great field locations include proximity to powerlines, dead trees, dirt roads, and watering holes. Poor locations are small fields with not much structure around for doves to perch on. The first order of business is to collect soil samples where you intend to plant crops. Soil samples should always be obtained before planting to give you the correct amount of fertilizer/lime needed. This will save you money, protect your seed investment, and increase plant vigor and seed production.

Doves are attracted to many native plants and ag crops. In addition to planting ag crops, managing native plants for doves is also a great technique for increasing the number of doves on your property. Many native plants such as woolly croton, ragweed, signal grass, bristle grass, pokeberry and spiny pigweed are all native plants that doves prefer. Identify areas with these preferred species first, then allow them to reach maturity before bushhogging. Planting and managing “dirty” ag crops can be beneficial if the weed is a preferred food source. For example, last year I staggered my sunflower planting but missed a couple of key rains and did not have a good crop of sunflowers. However, what filled in was tropic croton and Illinois bundle flower. I let the native plants remain with scattered sunflowers in the field and it held a lot of birds early in the year.

Always identify what “weeds” are in your dove fields and determine if it is a preferred seed source or not before spraying to clean it up. Wheat, browntop millet, dove proso millet, buckwheat, sesame, sunflowers, corn, soybeans, and grain sorghum are all seeds that doves prefer. Browntop millet and buckwheat have the shortest maturation time of approximately 60 days, with dove proso millet maturing in 70-80 days. Sunflowers, corn, and soybeans mature in 110 - 120 days. Millets, sunflowers, and wheat are usually more attractive in the early season and corn being more of a late season crop for doves.

With both dove zones in Alabama opening in September, seed maturation should be considered during initial planning so that seed is available before and during hunting season. Providing several seed sources that mature at different times can help hold doves in your area and increase the chances of a successful shoot throughout the entire dove season. Planting single species strips 20-30 feet wide with a strip of bare soil the same width between crops allows easier management of several crops in a field.

Late Summer – Early Fall:

Many birds are still producing crop milk and they search out small seeds to feed on during the September split. Having millets, buckwheat, sesame, and wheat available late summer and fall are ideal to attract birds to your fields during the first split of the season. Sunflowers would need to be planted in the spring as early as possible so they will begin to naturally drop seeds during the first split. Another technique is to stagger plantings about 2 weeks apart so that they will last well



Corn planted on 38 inch rows with volunteer browntop millet in between. Great early season and late season dove field. Photo by Tim Teel



Staggering planting dates of sunflowers in the same field allow a longer window of time to attract doves. Photo by Tim Teel

into the late season. Using a Clearfield variety sunflower offers more weed control options for keeping fields clean at ground level. Use a pre-emergent herbicide to keep sunflowers clean and follow up with a grass herbicide application postemergence to have a clean stand at the ground level.

Millet plantings can be staggered from late spring to mid summer to ensure seeds will be available during the summer and fall for the first split. Millets can be manipulated by burning which creates a clean area for doves to feed on available seed. Keep strips of open ground for doves to dust in adjacent to your strips of millet. When your state permits the practice of top sowing wheat; do so on bare strips between crops. Also, wheat fields planted the previous fall that were allowed to mature should be sprayed to keep them weed free. Burning standing wheat a couple of weeks before the season to allow the seeds to contact bare ground will also help attract birds in the area. Early season fields with smaller seeded species available and plenty of bare ground will be the most attractive.

A pre-planned dove shoot is challenging in the early fall with row crop harvesting in progress and lots of native plants reaching maturity spreading doves out. Keep tabs on your field and when doves start to pile in call your friends and have a hunt!

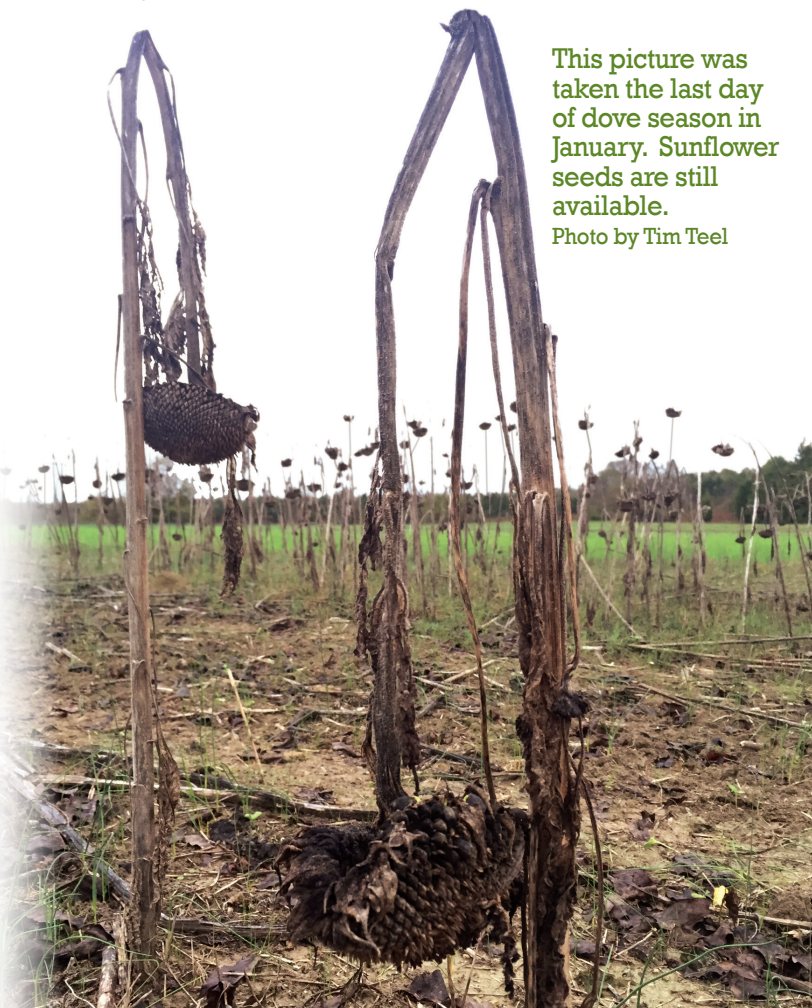
Late Season:

Sunflowers, soybeans, and corn will be mature by late August. Planting sunflowers in rows with a planter will allow you to keep bare ground beneath sunflowers that will trickle seeds out onto the ground throughout the season. I prefer to plant them on 38" rows with a planter so there is plenty of bare ground available. Keeping them clean by spraying and leaving them standing throughout the entire season will allow you to get the most benefit from planting sunflowers. If you want to make sunflower seeds available to plan a hunt; silage chop a few rows. Doves will use them most of the fall and winter if left standing. Large flocks of blackbirds can work on seed heads if left standing.

Planting an indeterminate variety of soybeans such as Eagle brand beans will produce a lot of seed and will hold beans in the pod until you bush hog them or deer start to strip them in the winter. Doves will swarm to the beans if made available during the winter months once it gets cold, wet, and food availability is scarce. Corn is a staple for late season dove shoots when migratory birds head south. Silage chopping or bushhogging standing corn can increase your odds of having a successful late season dove shoot. Single species plantings will allow for easier management of plants that have reached maturity

during the late season. Having as many options available later in the year as possible will allow you to attract doves consistently all season.

Dove field management is one of the most rewarding activities you can practice on your property. Management is done 10 months out of the year. Family time checking crops, having a season opener to get the neighborhood kids into hunting, and camaraderie with old and new friends through January are just a few of the benefits of dove field management. With our current weather trend, when sometimes it doesn't quite feel like deer season, you can get out and shoot some doves. In my opinion they are some of the best table fare out there. Get out, ride the back forty to find your new dove field location, and take some soil samples this spring! Try some of these recommendations and enjoy the social atmosphere that is associated with dove hunting! Check your states guidelines for harvest information and the definition of what is legal for a dove field. 🇺🇸



This picture was taken the last day of dove season in January. Sunflower seeds are still available. Photo by Tim Teel