

Mourning Dove

Zenaidura macroura

By Jim Pashby

September can still produce a few days with temperatures in the 90s. But during the first two weeks of the month, we almost always have a brief cold snap that sends many mourning doves and other thin-feathered birds south.

Though some mourning doves in the milder Flathead area stay in Montana year round, most skedaddle with those first chilly rains of late summer. They bunch up in flocks in late August and follow cold fronts to Texas and Mexico. That early migration reminds us that fall is right around the corner.

IDENTIFICATION

Almost everyone can ID a mourning dove by the male's sad-sounding coo, though the increasingly invasive Eurasian collared dove has a similar call that causes some confusion between the two species.

Roughly 12 inches long, both male and female mourning doves are robin-size with a small head and mostly plain gray coloration with black spots on the wings. The tail is slender and tapered, with white-tipped outer feathers.

Mourning doves often perch on telephone wires and forage for seeds on the ground. When taking flight, their wings make a sharp whistling sound as air rushes through the feathers. In flight, these birds move fast and bullet straight, wings often tucked tight against the body for speed.



OUTDOORS PORTRAIT

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Zenaidura was given in 1838 by French naturalist Charles Lucien Bonaparte to honor his wife, Zénaïde Laetitia Julie Bonaparte, Napoleon Bonaparte's niece. *Macroura* is Greek for "long tail."

FEEDING

Mourning doves are chow hounds, consuming roughly 12 to 20 percent of their body weight per day. When they find a mess of seeds on the ground, they'll scarf down as much as they can to fill their crop (throat pouch) before flying to a safe spot. There, they grind the seeds in their gizzard with grit they pick from roads to make the food digestible.

HABITATS

Mourning doves thrive in open or semi-open habitats, including farmlands, towns, roadsides, grasslands, forest clearings, and urban parks and neighborhoods. The only place you don't find them is in dense forest or high-mountain parks.

Because they tolerate brackish and alkaline water, they do well even in Montana's most arid regions.

REPRODUCTION

Mourning doves construct flimsy nests of twigs woven into a loose pile, typically in trees or shrubs.

In Montana, these prolific breeders raise three to five broods in a single year (and even more in warmer states). The female lays two white eggs at a time, then trades off incubation duties with her partner for the two weeks it takes the eggs to hatch.

In the first few days of a mourning dove's

life, both parents feed their chicks what's known as "crop milk" or "pigeon milk"—a nutrient-rich substance with a texture like cottage cheese secreted by cells in the crop, then regurgitated into a tasty meal for the baby doves, called squabs.

DRINKING

Mourning doves, along with the rest of the pigeon and dove family, are among the rare birds that can suck up liquid through their beak like a straw, instead of having to tilt their head back and let gravity do the work. The birds seem to pump their tongues like pistons to create a suction process like a vacuum pump, according to a scientific study that took X-ray videos of pigeons to figure out how they drink. This method lets doves drink quickly, lessening the time they are vulnerable to predators.

CONSERVATION

The mourning dove is the most widespread and abundant game bird in the United States. Though every year hunters harvest more than 20 million, the mourning dove remains one of the nation's most numerous birds, with a population estimated at 350 million.

Because Montana offers so many other game bird options, relatively few hunters here target doves when the season opens on September 1. Doves are fast and challenging to shoot, and their dark breast is delicious sautéed in butter or battered and deep fried. 🐦

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