

The Mourning Dove in Wisconsin

Quick Facts

- **Scientific Name:** *Zenaida macroura*.
- **Foods:** Weed seeds and waste grains.
- **Habitat:** Mourning doves are habitat generalists and prefer woodlots and edge components over interior forests.
- **Productivity:** Mourning doves are very prolific birds. The nesting season runs from April to September; peak nesting is May through August. Each pair produces multiple broods each year.
- **Abundance:** Mourning doves are one of the most abundant and widely distributed birds in North America and Wisconsin. The breeding range extends from central Canada in the north to southern Mexico in the south and encompasses all of the lower 48 states. Banding and harvest data from the USFWS indicate that 4-5 million doves migrate from Wisconsin each fall.
- **Hunt management:** Hunting is monitored and managed by wildlife biologists from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife agencies.
- **Effects of hunting:** Continent-wide hunting mortality is estimated at 10-15% of the fall population annually. This mortality is believed to be below the level which would significantly decrease long-term dove abundance or hinder expansion of geographic area. The mourning dove population in Wisconsin can sustain hunting without limiting the population.



Fig. 1. Breeding and wintering ranges of the mourning dove (adapted from Mirarchi and Baskett 1994).

Identification

The mourning dove is a member of the family of birds called Columbidae. Male and female mourning doves look very similar with grayish-brown backs, buff-colored undersides, black spots on the wings and behind the eye, and white feathers in the tail, which show during flight. Juveniles can be distinguished from adults by light buffing on the tips of the primary feathers which persist until the first molt. Young are indistinguishable from adults by the age of 3 months.

Population

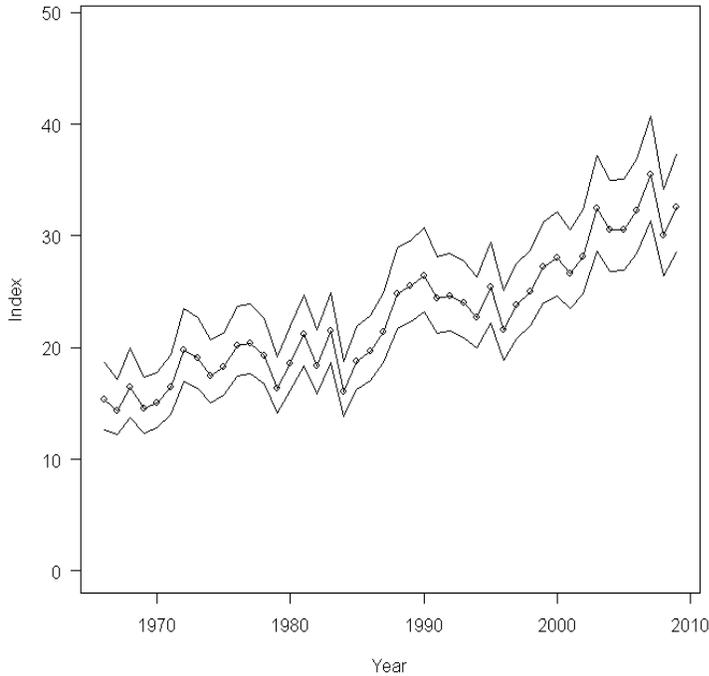


Fig. 2. Mourning dove population trends in WI (1966-2010) based on number of mourning doves seen and heard per route. Adapted from USGS Breeding Bird Survey results.

Mourning doves are abundant throughout Wisconsin, and are most numerous south of a line from Green Bay to Eau Claire. Conservative population estimates place the number of mourning doves migrating from Wisconsin in the fall at 4-5 million. According to data collected by the North American Breeding Bird Survey (Fig. 2), the dove population index in WI has shown an increase over time

(USGS 201). The index derived from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service Call Count Survey (or CCS, Fig. 3), shows a non-significant increase in the number of doves heard over both the long-term (since 1966) and the most recent 10 year period in Wisconsin (USFWS 2010)

Figure 3. *Trend in mourning dove abundance by state in the Eastern Management Unit over the last 46 years (1966–2011) based on CCS-heard data. Credible intervals (CI, 95%) that exclude zero provide evidence for an increasing or decreasing trend.*

Note that the Breeding Bird Survey data are actual count data and the Call Count Survey data are an index so the results are not directly comparable. The information is provided to demonstrate two of the multiple indices used to monitor mourning dove populations. All provide useful information when assessing the status of the mourning dove in Wisconsin.



Habitat Requirements

Mourning doves are highly adaptable to a variety of habitats including coniferous forests, deciduous forests, residential, urban, and agricultural landscapes. Habitat needs include trees for nesting and roosting, a food source and a source of water. Habitat in Wisconsin has likely expanded with agricultural expansion since settlement.

Reproduction

The mourning dove reproductive cycle in the Midwest begins in late April or early May, when egg laying begins and continues until early September when fledging ends. Doves build scant nests of twigs and grass usually placed in trees or shrubs 10 to 30 feet above ground. In wooded areas, elms and maples are preferred. In more open areas, coniferous shelterbelts and windbreaks are preferred for nesting.

Mourning doves lay two white eggs per clutch and raise between two and five clutches per year. Both parents take part in incubation and brood-rearing activities. Young doves, or squabs, hatch featherless and grow rapidly, increasing their weight by 14 times within 15 days of age. Young can survive on their own 5 to 9 days after leaving the nest and most leave the nest area within 2 to 3 weeks of fledging.

Previous investigations show nest success is variable and averages 53% in the Eastern Management Unit. Past research indicates that mourning dove productivity is above the level needed to maintain the population in the Eastern Management Unit.

Mortality

The natural mortality rate for mourning doves is high; approximately 6 out of 10 birds do not survive from one year to the next. Research indicates that mourning dove mortality is caused by a variety of factors including predators, disease, accidents, hunting, and weather extremes.

Food Habits

Ninety-nine percent of the mourning dove diet is comprised of weed seeds and grains. Preferred weed seeds include pigweed, foxtails, wild sunflower, and ragweed. Preferred grains include corn, sorghum and millet. Insects make up a very small proportion of the dove diet. Doves move an average of 2-8 miles for food.

Migration Patterns

Two different segments of the migratory dove population use Wisconsin. One segment is composed of doves that breed in the state. In fall, these doves leave Wisconsin following one of two migration routes. One route leads to wintering grounds in Texas, Louisiana,

and Mississippi, and the other to Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. The second segment of the mourning dove population that uses Wisconsin is made up of migrants from other states and Canada. Some of these doves winter in Wisconsin, others pass through to more southerly wintering areas.

Hunting

Mourning doves are currently hunted in at least 40 states. In the Midwest, all states except for Michigan have established hunting seasons and aside from several northeastern states, they are also hunted throughout the remainder of the United States.

Mourning doves have been hunted for many years throughout the United States and they continue to be one of the most abundant birds in North America. Nationwide, approximately 41 million doves are harvested annually. Other sources of mortality are 4-5 times higher than hunting mortality. Long-term banding studies indicate that 8-15% of dove mortality in the Eastern Management Unit is the result of hunting.

Studies in Ohio concluded that urban mourning doves are far less vulnerable to hunting than rural doves, indicating that dove numbers at backyard feeders will not be reduced due to rural hunting pressure. Other research has demonstrated that September hunting does not negatively impact the number of young doves added to the population.

Suggested Reading

Ecology and management of the mourning dove. Baskett, T.S., M. W. Sayre, R. E. Tomlinson, and R. E. Mirarchi, Editors. 1993. Stackpole Books. Harrisburg, PA.

Mourning Dove Population Status Reports (annual). USFWS. Laurel MD.

Mourning dove. *In* The birds of North America, No. 117. A. Poole and F. Gill, Editors. Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologist's Union.

For information about this topic, contact: [Assistant Migratory Game Bird Ecologist](#).