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What Kind of Dove is That?

by Dr. Ralph E. Mirarchi

See if this sounds familiar. You have been invited on a dove hunt in south Alabama, but it just as easily could be south Georgia, the coastal plain of South Carolina, or anywhere in Florida. You're standing on a fence line shooting mourning doves (*Zenaidura macroura*) coming to feed in the grain fields surrounding you. The birds have been flying pretty well, coming in high and fast in groups of half a dozen to a dozen or more. Suddenly, a group of 3 doves comes winging in left to right, out about 30 yards, but only about 10 yards off the ground. They are considerably smaller than the birds you've been shooting and appear to be young, short-tailed mourning doves. One of your friends, unfortunately as it turns out, decides to shoot and drops one of the group. When his dog retrieves the fallen bird you see it's a dove alright, but it sure doesn't look like any mourning dove you've seen before. What the heck kind of dove is it?

Comparison with Other Doves

The small dove that often causes this confusion among southern dove hunters is the common ground-dove (*Columbina passerina*), a permanent resident of the Coastal Plain regions of the southeastern and southwestern United States. They commonly are observed alone, in pairs, or in groups of three. They fly relatively close to the ground, feed on the ground, and nest on, or close to, the ground; hence, their name. Common ground-doves often are found in and around early successional stages such as old fields and young pine plantations, and are most often associated with the sandy soils typical of the southeastern Coastal Plain. They are therefore not nearly as widespread across the United States as the other dove and pigeon species. They typically feed on a wide variety of weed seeds, but will occasionally frequent planted dove fields along with the larger mourning dove. Their call is mournful like the mourning dove, but typically has only two syllables (woo-oo, woo-oo), when compared with the multi-syllable mourning dove call (coo-ah-coo, ooo, ooo). The ground-dove call most resembles the sound made when someone blows across the top of an empty soda bottle. However, the best way to distinguish between mourning and ground-doves, is by size, shape, color, and behavioral characteristics (see Table 1). Common ground-doves are only half the size (6 1/2 inches) of the mourning dove, or about the size of an eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*). Their wing tips (flight feathers) are rusty or chestnut in color and tails are short, square and black-tipped. They typically fly in small groups (2-3), low to the ground, and only for short distances.



Common ground-dove in sandy soil typical of the Coastal Plain

Population Status, Ecology, and Potential Problems

Certainly, as conservationists we want to make sure we don't mistake common ground-doves for mourning doves while hunting because they are not nearly as numerous as their relatives, and need special protection. Additionally, throughout their geographical distribution they are protected by both federal and state statutes as migratory nongame species and/or species of special concern. As such, their taking, accidental or otherwise, constitutes a wildlife law violation punishable by fine. And no

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