

EXPANSION OF WHITE-WINGED DOVES AND EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVES IN TEXAS

article by Todd Steele

Photo by Todd Steele



White-winged dove

Photo by Todd Steele



Eurasian collared-dove

Texas is not only blessed with the nation's largest number of doves but also in the variety of species that can be hunted. Currently, Texans may hunt four different doves, which include the popular mourning dove, the white-tipped dove of extreme South Texas, the expanding white-winged dove, and the imported Eurasian collared-dove. Of the latter two, their populations are greatly expanding across the state, offering new hunting opportunities for Texans.

The impact of dove hunting in Texas cannot be overstated; it is colossal! Consider these figures from a 2006 study conducted by Southwick Associates, Inc. for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Dove hunting in the state represents direct retail sales of over \$177 million and has an overall impact of \$316 million. Dove hunting generates over 3,000 jobs in the private sector, and \$21 million goes into the local sales tax revenue. It is no wonder that Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) has allocated a significant amount of effort and resources into our dove hunting and has been proactive in gathering sound science and gauging the expectations of our hunting community. This year, we will see the dividends of TPWD efforts in the expansion of the special white-winged dove season, essentially doubling the size of the hunting zone this coming September. To explain how we got the expanded zone, one must first understand how the whitewings exploded across the state.

Why whitewings have expanded outside the Lower Rio Grande Valley

There were several million white-winged doves isolated within 10 counties in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) in the early 1900s. They nested in thick riparian forests bordering the lower Rio Grande River. Beginning in 1920, agriculture began to rapidly expand in the valley, and the landscape went from rural to agricultural in relatively short order. The whitewings





Photo by David Sams

adapted to the agricultural terrain, nesting in large colonies in the dense canopies of citrus orchards. Then a series of hard freezes began to kill the citrus trees, starting in the 1950s, then again in 1960s. The final blow that impacted the valley's citrus industry occurred during the sustained freezes of 1983 and 1989. Citrus acreage decreased from over 69,000 prior to 1983 to less than 20,000 in 1989; the citrus industry in the valley never recovered. During this period of citrus habitat loss, the white-winged dove had two choices: one, to retreat southward to nest in the thorn-scrub and semi-deciduous forests of Mexico; the other, to push into the uncharted territories to the north. Lucky for us, they choose the latter. Why the white-winged dove pushed northward is open to much speculation. "Ask 15 different people why the doves migrated north, and you will get fifteen different answers," says Shaun Oldenburger, Webless Coordinator for the Small Game Program, which includes doves for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

White-wings adapt again

At one time, all of our white-winged dove exhibited strong migratory habits, nesting in the LRGV and heading south with the onset of inclement weather. The white-winged doves that moved north, out of the LRGV, seem to have adapted to city life with limited migratory ways. The vast majority of the white-wings in the state

are now the newly adapted urban birds. "We now have two distinct populations of white-winged doves that behave very differently from each other," says Dr. Bret Collier, research scientist and professor at Texas A&M University. Dr. Collier coins the new northern city birds "Urban Migratory Game Birds." North America has few urban migratory birds, which makes this species unique. The new urban birds are showing "fidelity," which means they are faithful to the breeding colonies and do not leave. The expansion of white-winged doves to other areas may be explained, in part, by the young being pushed out of their homes to take up residency in another town. Will we see another explosion in whitewings, as occurred during the peak 10-15 years ago? Probably not, but these birds are surprising everyone with their adaptability and range. Whitewings are still expanding their range and numbers, with the Pineywoods Region being the last region of the state that they have not occupied. However, they are just now beginning to show up in places like Carthage and Marshall. Perhaps, it is just a matter of time before they colonize this section of the state.

The city is a good place to live... if you're a whitewing

As everyone knows, Texas has been locked in a drought for the past decade. Part of the whitewing's favoritism with city life may be the plush life they have found

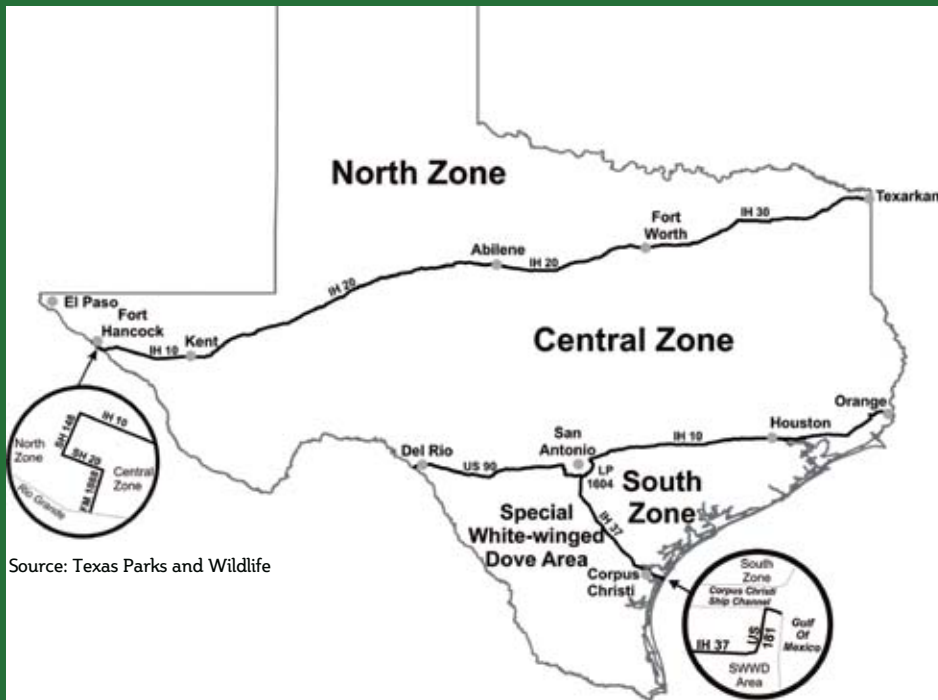
in neighborhoods loaded with sprinkler heads, swimming pools, birdbaths and feeders. The stress of raising a family in a drought is not nearly as severe when you have these creature comforts. The birds still prefer dense canopy in which to nest, and the older urban communities with more mature trees fit this requirement quite well. Not only have the birds shown a preference for the city, but also they may actually be following our highways in their expansion. Interstate 35, that runs between San Antonio-Austin complex to the Dallas-Fort Worth area, is no longer vast stretches of rural land; rather it is a series of communities, some small, others large, that act as easy stepping stones for whitewings looking for new areas to colonize. If one looks at the whitewing population survey along I-35, they will see large numbers of the birds up and down the freeway. Although not as pronounced, the same can be observed on I-10 running west out of San Antonio, and Highway 59 running up from the LRGV through Victoria and El Campo – both with significant colonies of whitewings – all the way to Houston.

Whitewings are prolific, given the right conditions

"Whitewings are prolific, and they have to be, given they have an annual mortality rate of 45 percent," says Oldenburger. They nest on average twice per season, which generally begins in May and lasts until



2013-2014 expansion of Special White-winged Dove Zone



Source: Texas Parks and Wildlife

random point, tallying all whitewings at that particular survey point. The surveys were conducted generally in May and June, with each biologist covering 15 random spots per day. Across the state, over a hundred TPWD personnel conducted surveys for a number of years. The data collected and analyzed helped pave the way for the expansion of the whitewing hunting zone, doubling the hunting area to the east. (See diagram above)

Dates and bag limits for the Special White-winged Dove Zone

The dates for Special White-winged Dove area are September 3, 4, 10, and 11, from Noon to sunset. Migratory Game Bird Advisory Committee and TPWD selected the open weekends earlier this year, and the federal wildlife officials approved the expansion later in the summer. “This regulation change would allow more hunter opportunity on an expanding and increasing population of white-winged doves in South Texas,” said Oldenburger.

At the same time, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) expressed

concern about potential increased harvest of mourning doves in the whitewing area, as a result of the expansion – the new area holds more mourning doves. The USFWS is mandating a two-bird daily bag limit reduction for mourning doves during the early season in the whitewing area, along with two white-tipped doves.

The previous season’s daily bag limit during the early season is 15 doves, with no more than four mourning doves and two white-tipped doves. The regulation change would modify the daily bag limit to 15 doves, with no more than two mourning doves and two white-tipped doves.

Currently 300,000 plus dove hunters harvest 1.3 million white-winged doves in Texas.

Outlook for the 2013-2014 season for white-winged doves

According to Oldenburger, the state outlook for white-wings is a “mixed bag.” The Panhandle region of the state is still suffering drought conditions, but the rest of the state has received favorable weather for both whitewings and mourning doves. There should be a good hatch on doves throughout the rest of Texas.

Eurasian Collared-doves in Texas

The other “newcomer” to Texas is the Eurasian collared-dove. The dove originates from the Indian sub-continent, Turkey, and the Balkans. They were imported into the Bahamas in the 1970s, and then the birds made their way into Florida. The first Eurasian collared-dove was noted in Texarkana in 1995; from there, they jumped south to the Houston-Galveston area and west to the Trans-Pecos region. Ornithologists call this “jump dispersal,” where a few birds travel long distances to establish a new population. Currently, they are found in just about every county in Texas, but nowhere in numbers of the white-winged dove. One estimate in 2004 estimated a statewide population of 200,000 Eurasian collared-doves. Their



Photo by David Sams

August, with clutch sizes of two eggs. Eggs take about two weeks to incubate, and birds are generally fledged in another two weeks. Young are in and out the door in about a month, leaving the adult pair – monogamous for the season – enough time to brood and fledge another family. “Texas now has an estimated 20 million white-winged doves,” says Corey Mason, former Dove Program Leader for TPWD. That is quite a jump from the 1930s, when only half a million existed in LRGV. In 1968, San Antonio was not even mentioned as having a white-winged dove population in the popular book “Whitewings,”

written by Cottam and Trefethan. Today, San Antonio has a population exceeding one million whitewings.

Texas Parks and Wildlife capitalizes on the windfall of whitewings

Just because you see a lot of whitewings in an area, it is not justification for a change in the hunting season. Changes to seasons are only justified by research and data, and the process is never quick. The expansion of this season’s special white-winged dove season was over two-years in the making, headed by Mason. Data was gathered for the dove survey using two main methodologies: the federally-mandated call or coo count, and the urban data survey. The urban data survey involved biologists from around the state conducting surveys on doves – both visual and audible – for two minutes per



numbers have certainly expanded since that estimate in 2004. The towns of Lubbock, Midland, and Amarillo have fairly large populations, and some outfitters in these areas are now offering hunts specific for Eurasian collared-doves.

Because of the species' feral status, not much research has been put into this species. They appear to be more prolific than other native species of doves. It has been observed that they nest year-round and will often start a new nest before their young have fledged on an established nest. Unlike whitewings, they are not gregarious and colonial, preferring to be in pairs or small flocks. This dove, too, may have proliferated by capitalizing on urban environments that provide a reliable source of cover, food, and water. They are frequently seen in small towns around grain elevators, feed stores, and livestock operations.

There is no estimate of how many birds are shot in Texas each year. Because they are considered feral, they can be hunted year-round with no bag limit. You are not required to leave a wing on a dove. However, to quote Dr. Collier, "Hunters should err on the side of information. Leaving a wing on a dove – or rock pigeon -- gives positive proof to a game warden on what you have bagged." Also, you are required to have a valid hunting license in Texas to shoot feral birds such as Eurasian collared-doves.

Other Doves and Related Pigeons in Texas

There are 14 species of Columbidae occurring in North America north of Mexico. In all, there are seven species of doves and pigeons native to Texas. The two protected species of doves, with no open hunting seasons, are the diminutive Ruddy (Common) Ground Dove and the Inca Dove. The two species of native pigeons – Red-billed Pigeon and Band-tailed Pigeon – are listed as legal game birds per federal and state guidelines. However, due to their limited numbers and distribution, there is no open season. The commonly seen Rock Pigeon (domestic pigeon) was introduced from Europe in the early 1600s and, like the Eurasian collared-dove, it is considered feral, with no closed season or bag limits.

The white-tipped dove is limited to extreme South Texas. It is classed as a migratory species under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, but the Texas population is migratory only because some fly back and forth across the Rio Grande. Most spend their lives within a small radius of a few miles. White-tipped doves fly low to the ground, often no more than 10 feet in the air. Their tendency is to walk rather than fly, and when you do see one in the air, it is generally a result of a flush rather than a pass over, as with other game doves. Not a great deal is known about this dove, but it is estimated that its range and population is stable. It is estimated that approximately 5,000 of these birds are harvested every season, more as an incidental take than a targeted dove.

Texas is home to a number of so-called "Grand Slams," ranging from the Grand Slam Hunting Package offered by TPWD; the grand slam of bay fishing, consisting of catching a legal redfish, flounder, and speck; the grand slam on teal, consisting of harvesting a blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, and cinnamon teal in the same day; to a multitude of grand slams on exotics. Not too far in the future, with the expansion of both the white-winged dove and Eurasian collared-dove, landowners might consider offering leases for multiple species, including mourning doves, white-winged doves, white-tipped doves, rock pigeon and Eurasian collared-doves – a "Grand Slam" on doves! 🌱



Photo courtesy of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

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White-tipped dove

