

LANDOWNERS FOR WILDLIFE



Dove Fields

By Fred Kimmel, Wildlife Biologist



In late August, with the traditional Labor Day opening of dove season approaching, hunters begin thinking about finding a place to open the hunting season. Hunters with access to harvested grain fields or hayfields have a ready-made dove-hunting field. Invariably, however, many hunters without access to farms or pastureland contact the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) during August to inquire about preparing a dove field on their hunting lease or other piece of property. Unfortunately, by this time it's too late to prepare a dove field. The time to begin planning a dove field is in the spring.

A wide array of crops and native vegetation can be used as a dove field; however, all successful dove fields have a few things in common. First, they contain an abundance of seeds. Doves are primarily seed eaters and consume very little insect matter or green forage. Grass seeds and grains are among the more important foods eaten by doves. Secondly, these seeds must be readily available. Doves prefer to feed on the ground in open cover where they can watch for approaching predators. Doves are not strong scratchers so they avoid areas with dense ground cover and rough vegetation. Finally, the field must be located in an area traditionally used by doves, a flyway so to speak. A well-prepared dove field may receive little use simply because it is located in the wrong area.

When discussing how to prepare a dove field, the subject of illegal baiting is very important. This document is not intended to fully discuss the issue of baiting, nor does it cover all possible baiting scenarios. A simple guideline to remember is that for dove hunting, it is legal to grow crops in accordance with LA Cooperative Extension Service recommendations and then manipulate these crops so that seeds that were grown on that particular field are readily available to doves. It is not legal to add supplementary seeds to a dove field, nor is it legal to harvest seeds and later return the seeds to the field. Dove baiting regulations are different than those for waterfowl. Contact LDWF Enforcement Division or visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website (www.fws.gov) for information regarding migratory bird baiting regulations.

The traditional Labor Day opening weekend is usually the only dove hunt for most Louisiana hunters. However, a well prepared dove field can produce exciting hunts throughout all three segments of the dove season, ending in most years in early to mid January. First-segment doves are usually local birds that hatched or spent the summer nesting in Louisiana. During the last two segments, most local birds have left Louisiana, and Louisiana hunters enjoy taking big, "northern" doves migrating from the Midwest.

PLANTING RECCOMENDATIONS

There are numerous crops that can be established to attract doves to a field. However, no matter what you plant, proper field preparation after the seeds are mature is critical. Remember, doves like to feed on clean ground, and a heavy accumulation of litter will discourage them from using your field.

Mowing, haying, disking or burning are some common farming practices used to expose seeds and create the clean ground that doves prefer. Haying or raking are preferred methods since they remove dead plant material, leaving seeds exposed on the ground. If haying or raking is not possible, shallow disking strips through the field is an alternative. Mowing may be the simplest method. Oftentimes, a controlled burn following mowing is necessary to remove the dead leaves and stalks. The method you select will be determined by your equipment, abilities and needs of your field.

Once seeds are mature, doves will be attracted to the field, especially if you mow or disk a few strips in the field two to three weeks prior to the season opening. Continue cutting strips each week until most of the field is cut. Freshly mown strips provide a new seed source that attracts doves up to opening day. Avoid major disturbance the last week before season opening. If you plan to hunt the later splits, save some of the crop to be cut immediately prior to those dates. You may consider leaving some areas of uncut crops or vegetation to provide cover for hunters.

Weeds are usually not a problem in dove fields, and many weed seeds are excellent dove food. But after several years of planting the same field, weeds such as Johnson grass may begin competing with the planted crop. Thick stands of weeds produce excessive ground litter that detracts from the quality of the field. If this occurs, disk the field early in the year to encourage the growth of weeds. Once the weed seeds germinate, spray with a non-selective herbicide. Plant the field shortly after the weeds die. Some weeds will re-sprout, but they will be much less dense than before.

Dove field consisting of sunflower.

LDWF file photo



COMMON LOUISIANA DOVE FIELD CROPS

BROWN TOP MILLET

Brown top millet is one of the easiest plants to establish and manage for a successful dove field.

Brown top millet matures in 60-90 days, so calculate your planting time to produce a ripe crop of seeds for the September dove season opening. Backdating from this opening date produces planting dates between mid-May to early June. Brown top millet seeds will persist on the seed head after ripening, so if necessary, you may plant all your fields simultaneously. If you plan to hunt later in the season, you can then delay cutting or mowing until just prior to the second and third dove hunting segments.



Photo by Wendell Smith, LDWF

Brown top should be planted on a well-disked seedbed at a rate of 10-15 pounds per acre. Heavier rates will produce dense stands of millet, often choking out the clean, open ground that doves prefer. Cover the seeds lightly after planting. Fertilizer type and application rate should be made in accordance with a soil test.



Photo courtesy of USDA APHIS PPQ Archive, forestryimages.org

SUNFLOWER

Peredovic sunflower is a preferred crop for attracting doves, but it also requires more management effort than other crops. Weed control is very important in sunflower farming. Both herbicides and soil cultivation can be used to control weeds until the sunflower crop is dense enough to shade out weeds. If these methods are not practical, broadcast planting seeds at a higher rate will shade out most weeds.

Sunflowers require about 100 days to mature, so an April planting date produces a ripe crop immediately prior to dove season. Sunflowers can be drill planted at a rate of 10-15 pounds per acre or broadcast at a rate of 30-40 pounds per acre. Once the seed heads are mature and dry, mowing is the preferred method to cut their heavy stalks and break open seed heads, scattering individual seeds on the ground for doves.

One drawback to planting sunflower in some areas is deer depredation. Small fields of sunflowers may be completely eaten by a hungry deer herd, especially during sprouting and early plant growth.

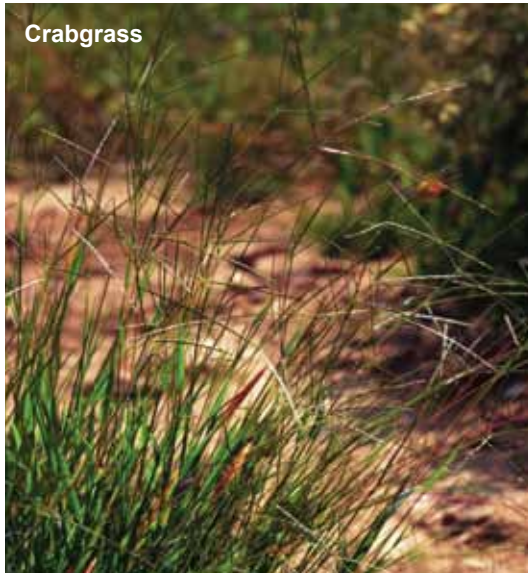
WHEAT

Wheat is often overlooked but can be a good crop for a dove field. However, since wheat is planted in the fall, the crop needs to be established the year before in order to provide good dove hunting. Wheat should be planted in late September or October. Broadcast 90-120 pounds per acre over a well disked seedbed and cover lightly. In many areas, deer will browse the wheat through the winter, but browsing will usually end in spring. Wheat will grow through the spring and mature in early summer. Mow, burn or disk standing wheat prior to the dove season to expose the seeds. Many hunters plant wheat for deer food plots, and cultivating wheat as described is an excellent deer management tool as well as providing additional recreation from dove hunting.



Photo by Howard F. Schwartz, Colorado State University, forestryimages.org

Freshly planted wheat fields will sometimes attract doves. If you choose to hunt doves over a freshly planted wheat field, it is important that the seed be planted as the result of a normal agricultural planting and done in accordance with LA Cooperative Extension planting recommendations. Otherwise, dove hunting over a freshly planted wheat field would be considered hunting over bait. Hunting over any freshly planted field can involve baiting issues, so to be on the safe side, dove hunters may want to avoid these areas.



Crabgrass

Photo by Ted Bodner, Southern Weed Science Society, forestryimages.org



Barnyard Grass

Photo by Howard F. Schwartz, Colorado State University, forestryimages.org

NATIVE VEGETATION

Natural vegetation such as goat weed, crabgrass, barnyard grass and bird-eye should not be overlooked, and these native plants can be easily managed to create excellent dove fields. Native grass fields can be cut and manipulated just like planted fields. Haying, mowing and burning work best on grass fields. Goat weed fields can be managed simply by mowing. Also, goat weed may grow in sparse stands, so mowing may not be required.



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