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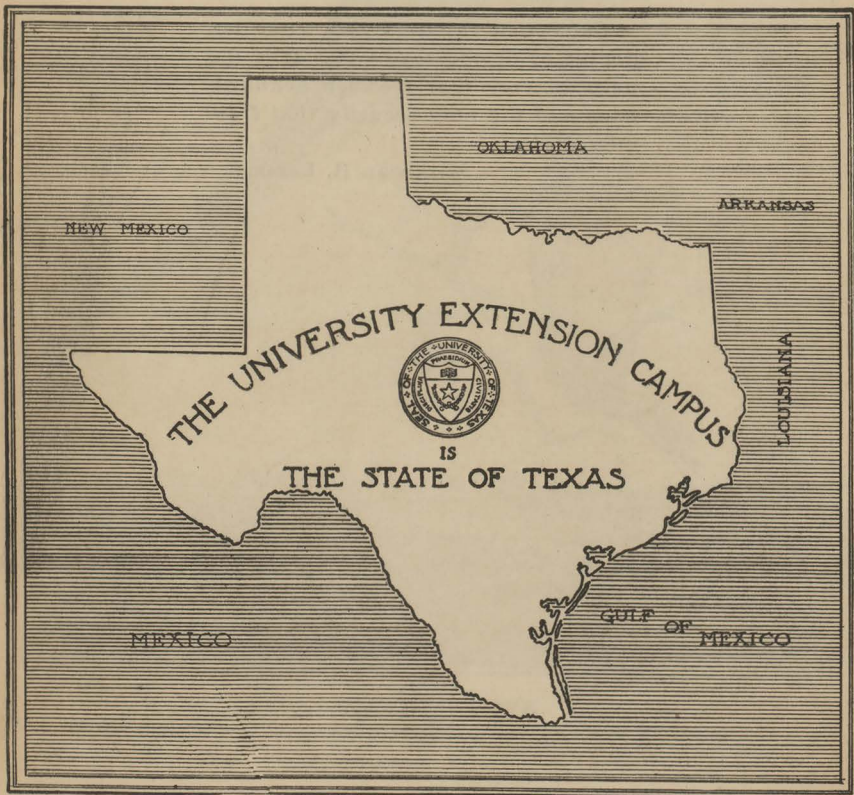
1916

**The Mourning Dove**

BY

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Associate Professor of Agricultural Education

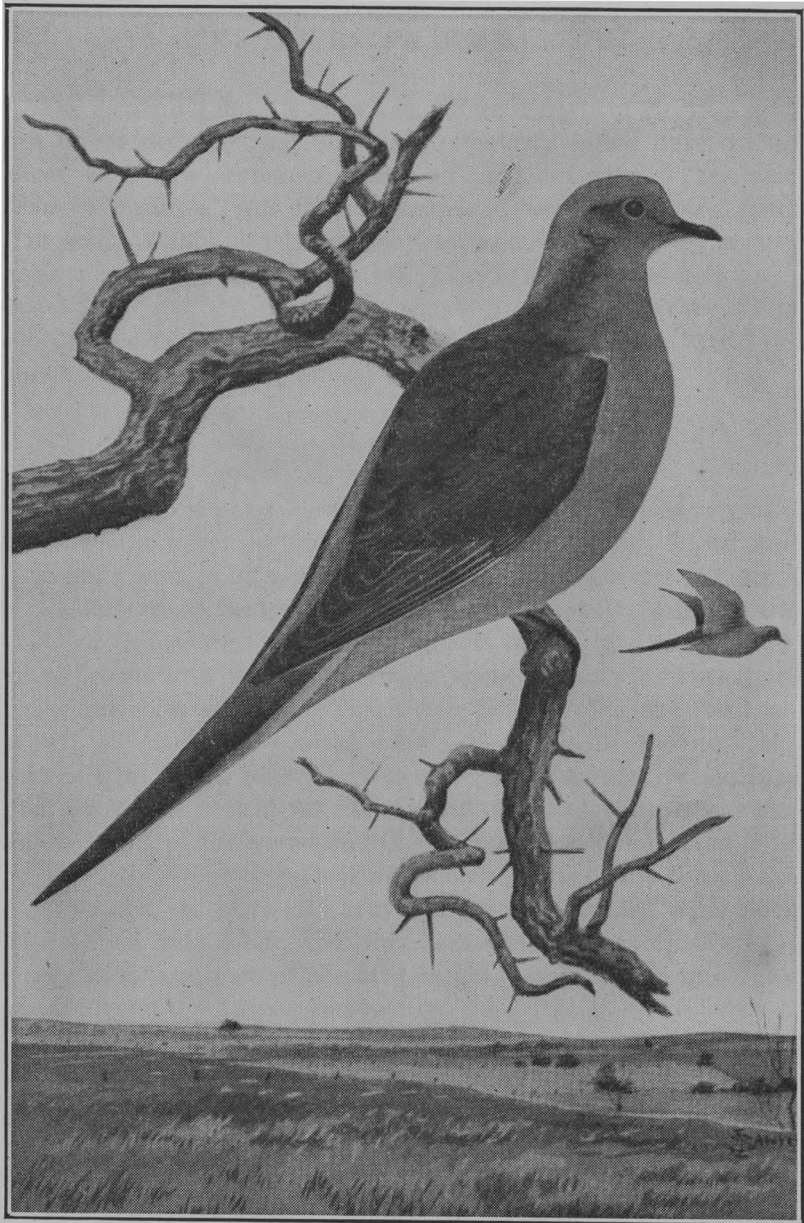


The benefits of education and of useful knowledge, generally diffused through a community, are essential to the preservation of a free government.

Sam Houston.

Cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy. . . . It is the only dictator that freemen acknowledge and the only security that freemen desire.

Mirabeau B. Lamar.



**MOURNING DOVE**

Courtesy of National Association of Audubon Societies

## THE MOURNING DOVE.

The mourning dove is known in different parts of North America under different names. It is popularly called dove, turtle dove, wild dove, common dove, and Carolina dove. The name "mourning dove" was given it because of its soft, mournful note. The song of this bird cannot be confused with the song of any other bird. The song is a low, soft, mournful "coo-wee-oo, coo-o-o, coo-o-o, coo-o-o, the first three syllables uttered rapidly as one continuous note, with the accent on the high-pitched 'wee,' the other notes of the song slower and all the same pitch."

### *Description*

To one who is not a close observer the remarkable beauty of a dove would never be noticed. It is not a "showy" bird and is usually said to be modestly clothed. But there are few birds so delicately, so beautifully, and so harmoniously tinted as the male of this species. The upper parts of the bird are grayish olive brown with just enough black spots on the wing coverts to make the color striking. The crown is slate blue, the forehead a soft, delicate wine-colored pink. The sides of the neck are tinged with bright pink which brightens into a ruby irridescence just above the shoulders. The white chin fades into the wine-colored pink of the breast and this changes into a rich cream buff on the belly. The blue-black spot on each side of the throat, the bluish sides, the olive and gray tail feathers banded with black and tipped with white, the pink feet, the soft, beautiful eyes—every mark and part of the bird as it sits quietly and trustfully seems to add to its grace and beauty.

### *Distribution of the Dove*

The mourning dove is perhaps the most widely distributed bird in North America during the breeding season. According to Mr. William Dutcher, an eminent authority on the distribution of the dove, it is found in all parts of temperate North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific, north to Ontario, and

sparingly in Manitoba and British Columbia. Its southward range extends to Panama and through the West Indies. In the northern portion of its range it is a summer visitor. Between the latitudes 30 degrees and 38 degrees it is a permanent resident, but south of 36 degrees it is an abundant resident. It breeds in every state in the Union.

#### *Nest of the Dove*

The nest of the dove is one of the poorest specimens of bird architecture. It is usually a loosely built platform of twigs, grasses, weed stems, or rootlets, occasionally lined with small grass stems. The nest is ordinarily placed on the horizontal limb of a bush or tree and may usually be found from three to twenty feet from the ground. Frequently the dove builds no nest at all, but deposits its eggs on the ground or on the flat surface of a rail or rock fence. Once in a great while the dove may be found using the repaired nest of the mocking bird or the cardinal. The eggs are pure white, smooth, moderately glossy and measure 1.06x.81. They are usually two in number, sometimes only one and very rarely three. The mother bird will incubate three eggs but in so far as the writer has been able to determine the third bird is never reared.

#### *Time of Nesting*

The mourning dove, like all other doves and pigeons, is very irregular in its nesting habits. This is especially true in the Southern States where the long warm season makes it possible for them to brood at almost any time of the year. Under ordinary conditions in the Gulf States, the nesting period of the dove extends approximately from the first of March to the middle of June for the first brood, and from June 15 to September 1 for the second brood. This does not mean that all nesting of the mourning dove falls between these dates. Mr. H. P. Attwater of Houston, the best authority in the State on the wild life of Texas, has records of doves nesting in Texas every month of the year. September nesting is quite common and nests are often found in October. The September and October nesting

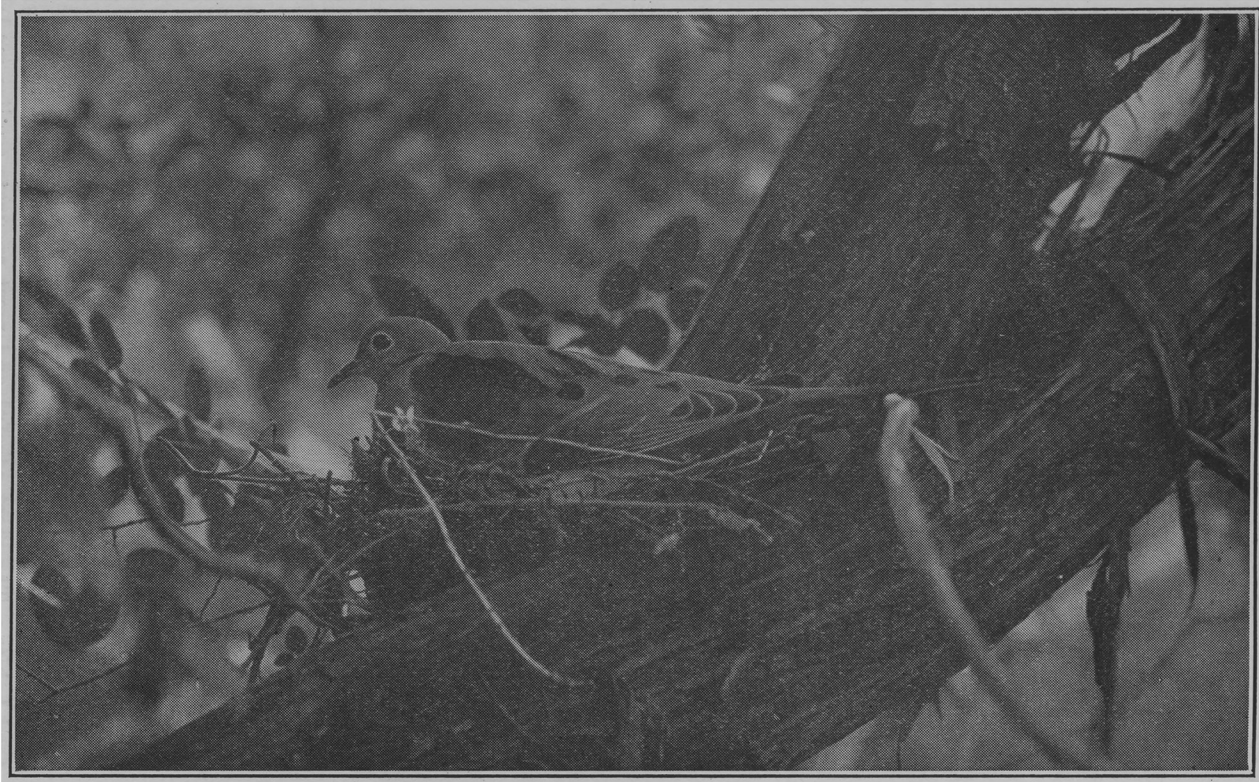
has been more common for the past two years than usual, due to the fact that the August storm each year destroyed thousands and thousands of nests, and the birds were compelled to build again in order to rear their young. Letters from various parts of Central Texas this year told of doves nesting in the stubble fields after September first. The writer found nests with eggs in them as late as September twentieth this fall. Some of these birds that were nesting late may have been the young of early spring broods; others had their nests destroyed by the storm or some other agency; and still others were brooding late as a natural result of their brooding habits, for the dove probably raises three broods a season occasionally in Texas when their nesting is not interfered with in any way.

#### *Migration Habits*

It has been suggested that the dove is resident only as far north as 38 degrees. The dove is not entirely resident south of this latitude by any means. They are essentially a migratory bird in practically all parts of the United States except the coast states and they are partially migratory in these. In north Texas the doves begin to gather in small flocks in early September and the latter part of September or early October finds these flocks considerably increased in size. These bunches move southward in late October or November and by December there are found only a few small, isolated bunches in the northern part of the state. These are the birds that have chosen to winter there. The doves are very abundant during the winter months in that part of the state lying south of a line passed east and west through San Antonio. They are fairly abundant in a few localities north of this line, but generally speaking, the dove is rare north of this line during the months of December, January, and February.

#### *Food Habits*

The only method of determining whether a bird is beneficial or harmful from an economic viewpoint is from a study of its food habits. The most careful and most accurate studies made of the food habits of the mourning dove have been made by the



**MOURNING DOVE ON NEST**  
Photographed by Elton Perry, Austin, Texas

Biological Survey at Washington. This bureau has no "ax to grind." Every statement given out by the bureau is published after investigation has proved it to be a fact. Their method of determining the food habits of birds is the most careful and most reliable they can find. They have the birds shot in different parts of the United States at different seasons of the year and the contents of their stomachs analyzed. All reports of food habits are based upon these analyses. Henry W. Henshaw, Chief of the Biological Survey, in his report on the habits and economic status of the dove said: "The food of the mourning dove is practically all vegetable matter (over 99 per cent), principally seeds of plants, including grain. Wheat, oats, rye, corn, barley, and buckwheat were found in 150 out of the 237 stomachs examined and constituted 32 per cent of the food. Three-fourths of this was waste grain picked up after harvest. The principal and almost constant diet is weed seeds, which are eaten throughout the year and constitute 64 per cent of the entire food. In one stomach were found, 7,500 seeds of yellow sorrel; in another 6,400 seeds of barn grass or foxtail; and in a third 2,600 seeds of slender paspalum, 4,820 of orange hawk-weed, 950 of hoary vervain, 120 of Carolina cranesbill, 50 of yellow wood sorrel, 620 of prairie grass, and 40 of various other weeds. None of these are useful and most of them are troublesome weeds. The dove does not eat insects or other animal food. It should be protected in every way possible."

The dove is sometimes accused of preferring grain to weed seeds, and some people believe that their grain-eating habit should condemn them. According to Mr. Henshaw, and he is perhaps our greatest authority on the food habits of birds, 24 per cent of the 32 per cent of the grain they consumed was picked up on the field after the harvesting season was over, leaving only 8 per cent of the total food eaten that could be charged up as loss to the farmer. Of this 8 per cent, the larger part was found to be wheat and was found to have been taken during the months of July and August. It must be remembered, too, that doves eat grain only when there is grain to be had in the field. Since the season when grain is found ripe in the fields is relatively short, the season that doves eat grain is necessarily short. All of the rest of the year these birds live on the seeds



of weeds. It seems next to impossible to get a case against the dove on its food habits. They are too much in favor of the farm and the farmer.

It must not be understood from these statements that the dove is not destructive to grain crops in sections of the United States at certain seasons of the year. They do some damage to oat crops, maize, feterita, and other grain crops in Texas. But the injury they do is almost negligible in practically all parts of North America. And, surely, the good they do so far outweighs the small amount of damage caused by them that they may truly be called the farmers' friends.

#### *Dove Season Opens too Early*

According to the law enacted by the law-making bodies of Texas in 1915 and which became effective the same year, the open season on doves is from September 1 to March 1 with a bag limit of fifteen birds per day. There are three distinct reasons why the open season on doves should not begin so early. In the first place, the dove is extremely irregular in its nesting habits as has already been pointed out. On August 27 past, the writer found three nests in a short walk around Austin. Two of these nests had young birds in them and in the third nest there was one tiny bird about two hours old and an egg just ready to hatch. This last nest was visited regularly until September 4th when the picture shown (see cut number 4) was taken. The nest was not visited again until September 10th. On that date the two little birds were found dead in the nest. There was a pond about sixty yards from the nest where the mother bird was accustomed to drink. Upon investigation eleven empty shells were found behind some bushes on the bank of the pond. The mother bird had probably met her death here. The long hours of miserable torture from a slow death by starving was the price paid by these two little baby doves for the pleasure a gunner got from shooting a dove from ambush.

This is not an isolated or exceptional case. On September 14 three more doves' nests were found in the edge of Austin. On September 20 a mother bird was observed brooding in the city. A large number of nesting records have been reported by resi-

dents of Austin during the month of September, and letters from other parts of the state bear witness to the fact that nesting is common in the stubble fields of Central and North Texas in early September. This means that hundreds—yes, thousands—of nests suffered the same fate as the nest described, and it also means that thousands and thousands of the doves killed at the opening of the season were young doves that had just left the nest and were so gentle that they could hardly be made to fly.

In the second place, licensing dove shooting for six months practically puts an open season on quail for the same time in many localities. The hunters were numerous last season who went out ostensibly for doves but bagged quail all the day, at the same time, taking doves enough to hide the quail. The true sportsman, of course, will not do this. Neither will the true sportsman violate any other game law. Unfortunately, a proper respect for the game laws of Texas has never been developed in the entire citizenship. The most flagrant violations of the laws protecting antelope, deer, turkey, prairie chickens and other game in Texas are not uncommon. The present bird and game law in Texas with a few amendments regarding the dove season, prairie chicken, turkey, deer, bag limits, etc., is a good one and would serve the purposes of the state exceedingly well if it could be enforced. Its enforcement seems to be impossible under present conditions. *Texas needs and should have a hunter's license for every individual who goes into the field to shoot game. In addition to this Texas needs and should have a bird and game commissioner, with a system of wardens and deputy wardens over the state whose business it would be to see to it that the laws protecting the wild life of the state were rigidly enforced.*

In the third place, the dove is a game bird and is regarded by some people as the most delectable of all game birds. This being true, it becomes incumbent upon the sportsman as well as the farmer to lend a hand in getting such legislation as will preserve a species that would surely become exterminated under the present long open season. The dove season should be made to conform to the quail season. All nesting except in very extraordinary cases is over before the quail season opens, and the spring nesting does not begin until February. Under such a law the preservation of the dove would be assured.



**NEST OF MOURNING DOVE**

**Photographed by Elton Perry, Austin, Texas**

*Last Passenger Pigeon Is Dead*

It is generally known that the last passenger pigeon died in the zoological gardens at Cincinnati, September 4, 1914. It is also known that the destruction of these birds may be attributed to the slaughter of millions and millions of them during migration and during the breeding season. The stories that are told of the wholesale destruction of these birds are almost past believing. The writer spent the early part of his life near one of the biggest pigeon roosts east of the Mississippi, and he has heard the old settlers tell how people used to drive their hogs in for miles and miles and fatten them on the pigeons. It has been but a few years since the skies of Texas were darkened as great droves of these beautiful birds passed over in migration. They would all but shut out the light from the sun as they passed over hour after hour. But the passenger pigeon has gone. If the present dove law were to remain in force any great length of time, and the people knew as little about the mourning dove as they knew about the passenger pigeon, the dove would go the way of the pigeon.

*Farmers Want Doves Protected*

The Texas Farmers' Congress at College Station July, 1915, passed the following resolutions regarding the change in the dove law:

“WHEREAS, At the last session of the Texas Legislature, and notwithstanding the wishes and requests of the majority of the farmers of this State, an amendment to our bird and game protection laws was passed and approved by the Governor, whereby the open season for killing doves was extended, thereby permitting gunners to commence shooting these birds on September the 1st instead of November the 1st, as formerly; and

“WHEREAS, The common doves are very innocent, harmless and useful birds on the farm, particularly in the fall of the year, when they destroy immense quantities of weed seed, etc.; and

“WHEREAS, The Texas Farmers' Congress has always stood for conservation of our natural resources and the preservation of the useful species of our wild birds, and has continually advo-

cated and endorsed reasonable laws for their protection; therefore, be it

*Resolved*, That this Congress deeply deplores the fact that this change has been made. We believe that it is a step in the wrong direction, and that eventually it will be found that in passing this amendment a great mistake has been made, for the reason that, on account of this unfortunate change, doves will rapidly diminish in numbers, and will be in danger of being exterminated, and eventually going the way of the wild pigeon; and be it

*Resolved*, That we urge upon farmers in all parts of the State to use every legitimate means to prevent sportsmen, hunters, thoughtless boys, pot-hunters, ignorant negroes, Mexicans, aliens and others from invading their pastures and trespassing upon their premises for the purpose of slaughtering these birds, and to do all in their power to have the mistake corrected and the law amended at the next session of the Texas Legislature confining the open season in which these useful birds may be killed to not more than three months in the hunting season or to prohibit the killing of them altogether; and be it further

*Resolved*, That the members of this Congress hereby express their hearty appreciation and thanks to those Senators and Representatives who opposed the amendment referred to and who voted against it, and that a copy of these resolutions be sent to each Senator and Representative of our last Legislature."

## STATEMENTS FROM MEN WHO KNOW

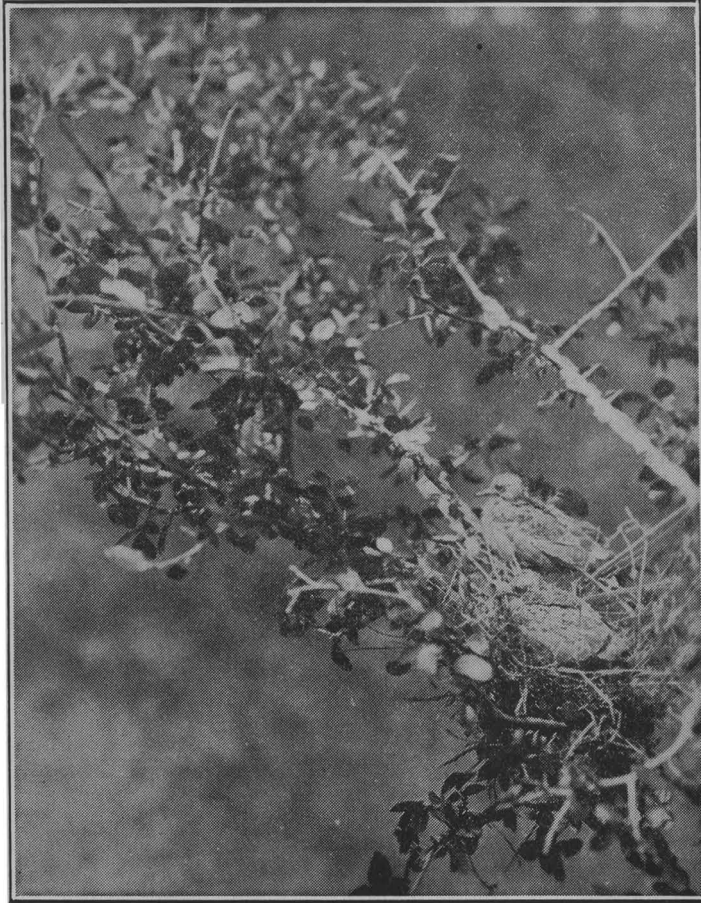
The following statements are from men who have studied the whole situation carefully. These men are scientists and thinkers. They have given the dove question a great deal of thought and have accurate data regarding the harm that must result from the present long open season.

“The usual breeding season of the common or Mourning Dove in this State, is from March till June. Also many doves build nests and raise second broods in July and August. Frequently their regular nesting operations are greatly interfered with in these months by washing rains, wind, and hail storms, which sweep over great areas of their breeding range, and blow many of their frail nests out of the trees. When these accidents happen the doves build new nests, and they are often found with eggs and young in the month of September and sometimes in October. The two destructive West Indian hurricanes which visited Texas in the months of August, 1915, and 1916, destroyed thousands of the parent birds, and swept away their nests. This accounts for the numerous records of nests reported in September from counties in different parts of the State. For the same reason, many young doves are not strong on the wing and consequently are at a great disadvantage and unable to take care of themselves in October. My candid opinion is that it was a great mistake to change the law, and allow hunters to kill them in September. I think that the open and closed season for doves should be the same as for quail.

“Besides its economic value as a great destroyer of weed seed, and an important food factor connected with Texas farm and ranch life, the common dove, like the quail, is one of the most valuable of our small game birds, and should be given the same protection as the quail. This is not a sentimental but a common sense business proposition. Our useful birds, fish, and game are among the most valuable assets of this State, and deserve reasonable laws for their protection and preservation, not only for the present but for future generations.

“It is unfortunate that doves occasionally commit depreda-

tions on crops for a short time in the year in some counties, and the complaints of those who have suffered loss on this account, deserve consideration and regard. But this is no good reason why they should be exterminated in other great regions of the



Young doves in nest near Austin, September 10. Found starved to death in nest six days later. Mother bird had been shot by a gunner.

Photographed by W. H. Warren, Austin, Texas

State where certain grain crops are not raised. Other birds equally as destructive to shattered or wasted grain are not accused, chiefly for the reason that they are unsuitable for 'pot pie' purposes. In this connection it is important to remember

that in Article 292 of the Texas Bird Laws, it is expressly stated that 'no person or persons are prevented from killing birds that are at the time destroying their growing crops.'

*"The accusation that doves act as disseminators of Johnson grass and other undesirable seeds, which has been presented by some as an excuse for the wholesale slaughter of these innocent birds, has been disproved and emphatically denied by the highest scientific authorities of the Biological institutions in the United States. Seeds consumed by doves, quail, finches, and other seed-eating birds, are eaten for the embryo or kernel which they contain, and the grinding and digestion of this food necessarily destroys the seeds. Many fruits and berries eaten by mocking birds, thrushes, and other species of birds, are eaten solely for the nourishing matter or pulp which is attached to or surrounds the seed. In this case the seed often escapes destruction and is discarded either by ejection or rejection, and by this means becomes scattered in that locality. In other words, seeds which are contained in nourishment are eaten and survive, while seeds which simply contain nourishment are eaten and destroyed.*

"Many years of experience in this State as a field naturalist and collector afforded me unusually favorable opportunities for becoming acquainted with the life histories and food habits of our common wild birds and animals. It enabled me to realize their great use and value to mankind, and the necessity of protecting them. If it could be enforced, our present Texas Bird and Game Law (with a few changes or amendments in regard to the dove season, prairie chicken, bag limits, etc.) is a good one. *Undoubtedly the most important, is the adoption of an amendment with as little delay as possible, of a hunter's license for anyone and everyone, old or young, who goes hunting.* This would result at once in cutting out a host of irresponsible and thoughtless persons (negroes, Mexicans, and others) who roam over the country during all months of the year, shooting at everything they come across with fur and feathers.

"I believe that all real sportsmen, hunters, and citizens, who are seriously in favor of the preservation of useful wild life, and the reasonable protection of our valuable game birds and animals will be found willing to advocate and support the movement for a hunter's license, and I earnestly hope that the next



session of our legislature will not fail to adopt this important and necessary amendment.”

H. P. ATTWATER.

Address

2120 Genesee St.,  
Houston, Texas.

“The mourning dove is the most widely distributed bird in North America, and everywhere it constitutes a valuable asset to the agricultural interests of the country. It destroys more weed seeds than the quickest human paid worker the farmer can get. We need the dove’s cooperation. Its work is sure to be well done.

“If the wholesale slaughter of doves in the South is not stopped at once there won’t be any left. The species is threatened with absolute extinction. If this massacre is kept up for the next generation the turtle dove will be a very rare bird, and we shall find the weed problem more serious and the farms more expensive to manage and control.

“We do not seek to totally prevent the shooting of game birds and we have no ultra-sentimental feeling against sport. Sport is a good thing so long as it is kept a good thing. And it is the sportsmen who are our most helpful co-workers. But it is a short-sighted policy of any commonwealth that does not make provision for the conservation of the wild life of the state and for the protection of all birds helpful to the farmer.”

T. GILBERT PEARSON,

Secretary National Audubon Societies.

1974 Broadway,  
New York City.

“The dove is more useful to us alive than dead. Size considered, it is the most useful farm-hand we have. The data in possession of the Biological Survey show that each bird of this species destroys hundreds of prospective weeds by devouring the seeds that otherwise would give rise to such noxious vegetation. Every hunter who has had the curiosity to examine the contents of the crop of a bird of this species can attest to the fact that the owner has lived principally on weed seeds. It has

been shown, time and again, that by far the greater part of the grain the dove consumes is waste grain picked up in the fields. The dove deserves adequate protection."

H. TULLSEN,

President Central Texas Audubon Society.

Taylor, Texas.

"The dove . . . has the right of every game species to protection during the breeding season. Not to kill the goose that lays the golden egg is a guiding principle in all game and fish laws. Species must be protected during the breeding season or they will rapidly decrease in numbers. Texas should deal liberally with the dove, for it is a migratory game bird and if reduced in numbers, states to the north will be justified in asking that the open season be materially shortened."

E. W. NELSON,

Acting Chief, Biological Survey.

Washington, D. C.

