

Dove Fields

How to attract birds to your hunting spot — legally

Federal migratory bird regulations prohibit hunting mourning doves over bait. However, doves can be attracted both effectively and legally in Kentucky using managed fields.

Fields managed as wildlife food plots, or where normal agricultural practices have occurred, are perfectly legal to hunt as long as there is no sweetening of the field with the addition of bait. Baiting includes placing grains, salt or other attractants in an area used for hunting.

Generally the most productive fields have sunflowers, but wheat, millet and even native plant fields can yield bountiful opportunities for hunters.

Dove field preparation is relatively simple, although weather, agricultural practices or other food plots in the surrounding area will influence whether the birds will use the field. However, if you select your field carefully and manage it well, you are likely to enjoy some good dove hunting.

Field Selection

If possible, select a field in a relatively high elevation to cater to flyover doves. Power lines, dead trees, and other open perches in or adjacent to a field are also desirable. Ponds or streams nearby are important, too, as doves need to drink frequently. Also keep in mind that doves need ample bare ground to feed; heavy thatch may keep birds away from an otherwise good field. Obviously, larger fields have greater potential for packing in more doves, but even 1- or 2-acre fields can be effective for small hunts.

Finally, if you have some weeds, don't worry because they're probably food sources for doves as well.

Winter Wheat Fields — Fields planted with winter wheat during the previous fall for wildlife or for a cover crop make excellent dove fields. Farmers who rotationally plant tobacco or other specialty crops may leave wheat fields intact all year. These fields usually just need some strip mowing once the seed is ready.

Spring Planted Fields — First, get a soil test on your field for the grains you intend to plant. Your county Cooperative Extension office can help you collect and test your samples. In the absence of a soil test, you can apply 200 pounds an acre of 12-12-12 fertilizer to your field one to two months before seeding.

Sunflowers take 120 days to mature, so plant them in late April to early May so they'll be ready for the Sept. 1 opener. For conventional planting, plow and disk a seedbed then broadcast Peredovick variety sunflowers at 15 pounds an acre. Cover seeds lightly by disking, cultipacking or dragging.

For no-till planting into a grass or weedy field, spray the area with herbicide on a warm, calm day in mid-April to reduce compe-

tion with the sunflowers. Consult your local farm supply store for the right herbicide and always follow label instructions. Next, plant 10 pounds an acre of Peredovick sunflowers with a no-till drill or a corn planter, cross hatching the field if necessary.

You may choose a 90-day plant, such as proso/dove millet or browntop millet, if you're getting a late start on preparing a field. Broadcast seed at 15 to 20 pounds an acre, or 8 to 10 pounds an acre for no-till. If you have less than three months before season opens, plant the following mixture: Buckwheat, 10 pounds an acre; proso millet, 5 pounds an acre; and Peredovick sunflowers, 5 pounds an acre. This should give you some mature seeds by Sept. 1 and many more for weeks thereafter.

Weedy Fields — Abandoned or otherwise fallow fields can make for great dove hunting. Select fields dominated by annual plants, such as ragweed, pigweed, foxtail and wild millet. Historically, doves probably fed in similar fields created by grazing bison or burning and cultivation by native Americans. You can create such fields by spraying or disking in late winter to early spring.

Field Management

The ingredients of good field management are simple: manipulation in time to attract doves for a hunt, bare ground with scattered seeds, and uncut areas for hunter cover. Begin by disking a strip around the perimeter of your field in early August. This bare ground will attract birds.

Mow a few 50- to 100-foot-wide strips in your field by mid-August. You should attract doves if the seeds are dry. Consider windrowing with a hay rake to expose more bare ground and scatter seed if you have much thatch on the ground after mowing. Otherwise, lightly disk over mowed strips to expose soil and seeds if necessary.

Mow half or more of the field by opening day, and leave strips or small islands intact for hunter concealment. Continue mowing, windrowing or disking strips every few weeks as long as you wish to hunt.

Consider sowing winter wheat as a cover crop once you've finished dove hunting for the year. Remember, however, that you cannot hunt waterfowl,

doves and other migratory game birds on the field — or around it — until 10 days after all the wheat seed has germinated.

Go to www.fws.gov/le/HuntFish/WhatIsLegal.htm on the Internet for more details on regulations. For more details on preparing dove fields, call 1-800-858-1549 and request copies of our "Annual Grains" and "Food Plots" Habitat How-To publications. Good hunting!



Proper plantings and field manipulation can attract doves to your field legally. Sunflowers are the best attractant.

Brian Clark is a Private Lands Wildlife Biologist for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.